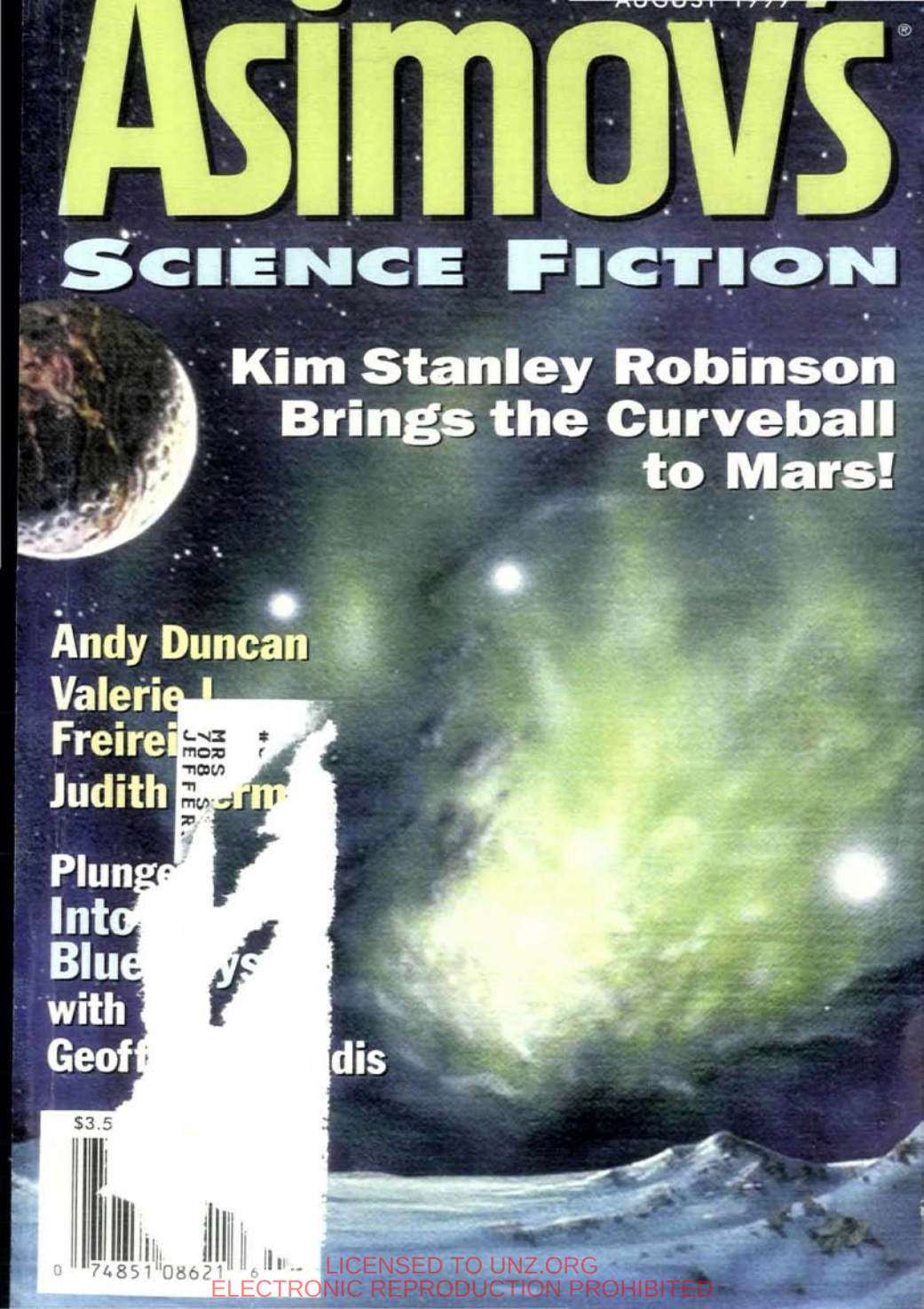

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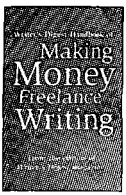

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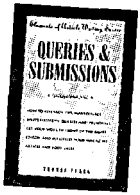

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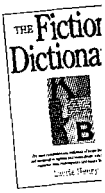

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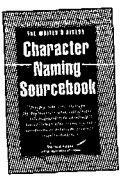

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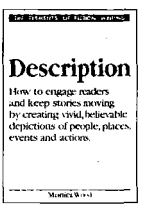
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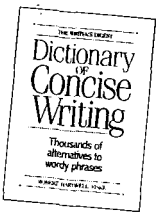

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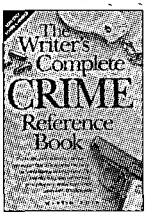

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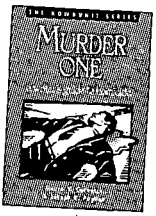

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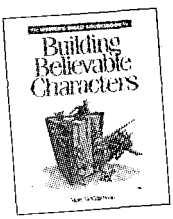

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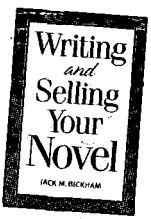

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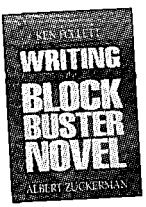

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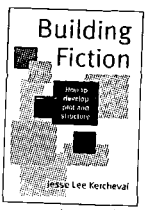

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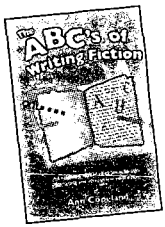

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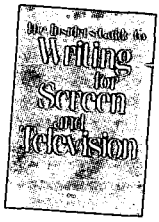

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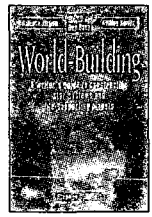

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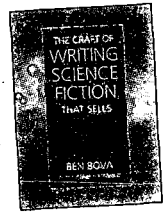

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Vol. 23 No. 8 (Whole Number 283)
August 1999

Next Issue on Sale
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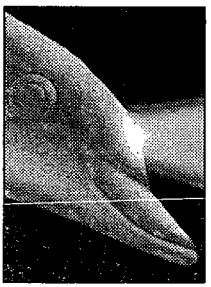

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Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept, 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. -USPS- 522-310; ISSN 1065-2698. GST #R123293128

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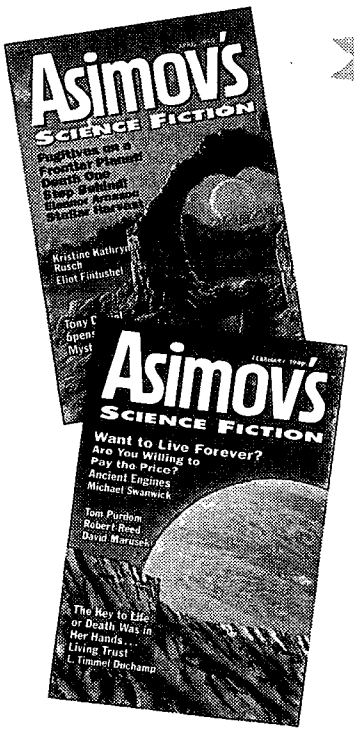

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE WHEEL KEEPS TURNING

Last week I had dinner with a new SF writer, one who has sold about half a dozen stories, and she asked me if I would mind taking a look at a manuscript of hers that was collecting rejection slips. Something evidently was wrong with the story, she said, because the editors kept sending it back, but she couldn't see where the problem lay and the editors who had nixed it hadn't been particularly explicit in stating their objections. Perhaps, she said, I could put my finger on the story's weakness. And the request took me back to an extraordinary moment early in my own career—all the way back to March 1956, in fact.

Do you remember March of 1956?

Probably not. The demographic surveys of the SF audience show that most of the readership of this magazine belongs to the baby-boom generation, the people who came swarming into the world between 1945 and 1963 or so, and my guess is that the birth-dates of most of you fall into the 1950-60 slot. So the events of 1956 aren't going to be very clear in your mind.

They certainly are in mine, though. I was twenty-one years old that year. 1956 was one of the most significant years of my life and I have bright and vivid memories of much that was happening then.

I began that year as a senior in college, living in a furnished room on West 114th Street in New York with Harlan Ellison in the room next door. In June I graduated and in August I got married, rented an apartment all my very own, and began buying actual adult furniture. (Some of which I still use, forty-three years later.) My career as a writer was just hitting full stride. At the World SF Convention in New York in September I collected my first Hugo.

There were some notable world events that year too—rather apocalyptic stuff, in fact. We conducted the first open-air test explosion of an H-bomb at Bikini Atoll in May. A month later, there was an uprising in Poland against Soviet rule. It was crushed by Russian troops. In July, the government of Egypt seized the Suez Canal and threatened to close it to Western shipping, touching off a world economic crisis. A summer of fruitless negotiation led to the invasion of Egypt by the armies of Israel, Great Britain, and France in October in what proved to be an abortive attempt to return the canal to international control. More or less at the same time, an anti-Communist rebellion broke out in Hungary and this, too, was squelched by the Soviets. In the middle of all these startling things, the United States held a presidential election in which the incumbent, Dwight D. Eisenhower, easily defeated his challenger, Adlai Stevenson, even though Eisenhower had had a serious heart attack the previous year: it was not a time when the country wanted to change leaders.

And there I was, a college boy from Brooklyn just getting ready to take his first steps into real-world life—if you call setting yourself up in business as a full-time science fiction writer an entry into "real-world life."

What I had been doing, all through my senior year at Colum-

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bia, was writing stories as fast as I could turn them out and bringing them downtown to the editors of the half a dozen or so SF magazines that existed then. Randall Garrett, a well-known writer of the era who also was living in the residential hotel where Harlan and I had rooms, had introduced me to these editors—John W. Campbell, Howard Browne, Robert Lowndes, and others—and every Monday I would make the rounds of the editorial offices, dropping off the stories of the previous week and picking up anything that hadn't sold. (Just about all of my stories of that period did sell, but not always on the first try!)

The big editor, in more ways than one, was John Campbell. Since 1937 he had guided the fortunes of *Astounding Science Fiction,* the predecessor of today's *Analog*; it was Campbell who had launched the careers of such great writers as Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, A.E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, and Arthur C. Clarke. To me and my whole generation of science fiction readers and writers he was a legendary figure, though now he was in the twilight of his long career. A massive man with a powerful voice and a commanding no-nonsense manner, Campbell seemed intimidating indeed to a youngster like myself, but, shoved forward by the ebullient Randall Garrett, I had managed (to my own amazement) to sell him half a dozen stories in the six months between August of 1955 and February of 1956. By March, it was part of my regular routine to stop off every other Monday at Campbell's small, cluttered office in a drab old building on East 45th Street with my latest opus.

Often, on these Mondays, I would encounter other writers or artists who also had dropped in to see Campbell. One week it might be Kelly Freas, and the next Algis Budrys, or Ted Sturgeon, or even Isaac Asimov. I found all that pretty awesome too. But on the particular March day in 1956 that I have in mind, Campbell was being visited by no less a person than Will F. Jenkins, himself a legend of the field, the author of such cherished classics as "First Contact," "Sidewise in Time," and "The Mad Planet." His effortlessly told stories, most of them published under his pseudonym of "Murray Leinster," had been admired by editors and readers for forty years.

Jenkins was a smallish, dark-haired man with a soft, lovely Virginia accent. I had met him before, though he hardly would have remembered it. It was at a little convention six years before in a squalid meeting hall in Manhattan; I had asked him to sign the first thing I could lay my hands on, which was that month's issue of *Astounding,* and he had scrawled his name in pencil on the contents page. John Campbell had signed right below—in ink. The magazine is still in my possession today.

That day in 1956, Will Jenkins was sixty years old. John Campbell was forty-six. I was twenty-one. So we represented three different generations of science fiction writing.

One thing we had in common was our precocity. Will Jenkins began selling stories at seventeen, in 1913. Campbell had sold his first story in 1929, when he was nineteen. I had made my own first sale in 1953, at eighteen. I realize now that these two titans of the field, the grand old man and the legendary editor, must have felt a touch of kinship with the pink-cheeked beardless boy who now sat with them, presumably as a colleague, in that messy little office.

Well, and there I was, with my latest story—a fourteen-page effort called "Sourdough," something about a prospector who was using a dowsing rod to find uranium ore in the South Dakota hill country. Even

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as my early stories go, it wasn't very much of anything. I had carefully constructed the basic idea to fit John Campbell's big obsession of the moment, which was the reality of psionic powers. (Campbell was ever an obsessive, and his writers quickly learned to keep up with his whims and fads.) Jauntily I took a seat next to Will Jenkins at John Campbell's desk, was duly introduced, shook hands, and slipped into my new mode of calm acceptance of my professional status. I could not allow myself to think I was mingling with demigods. Here we were, right?—just Will and John and Bob, three SF people.

"Bob's one of our new writers," Campbell said casually to Jenkins—"Do you have anything today, Bob?"

"As a matter of fact, John"—I had lately begun calling him "John," and the heavens had not fallen upon me—"I do." And I opened my briefcase and took out the manuscript of "Sourdough."

"Well, let's see," Campbell said. I assumed he would slip the manuscript into *his* briefcase, read it at home that night, and give me his verdict the following week. But to my utter horror he began to read the story then and there.

It doesn't take long for an experienced editor to read a fourteen-page manuscript. For me it was an anguished eternity, though. I sat there studying Campbell's every flicker of expression at a distance of perhaps five feet while he methodically leafed through my story, scowling occasionally, tugging at the tip of his nose, stroking his chin. I had $120 at stake, aside from the prestige, vast at the time, that accrued to anyone who sold a story to *Astounding*. That $120 fee was non-trivial: perhaps $1500 in modern purchasing power, and remember that I was still in college, living in a furnished room that cost $10 a week: this one sale represented three months' rent.

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At last John looked up and said casually, "Something's wrong with the ending of this, but I'm not sure what. Will, would you mind taking a look?" And he flipped my story across the desk to Will Jenkins.

So I had to endure a second in-my-presence reading of "Sourdough," and this time by the senior figure of the field, a man who had been a well-known professional when Calvin Coolidge was in the White House. Jenkins, the cagey old pro, skimmed swiftly through the story, nodded, indicated page twelve. "I see the problem," he said—to Campbell, not to me. And offered a dazzling rewrite suggestion, with which Campbell concurred. John pointed to the typewriter on his secretary's desk and instructed me to sit down and write a couple of new paragraphs right on the spot.

Which I did, in a state of high astonishment; and Campbell bought the story ten minutes later.

All this was a long time ago. Jenkins and Campbell have been dead for decades. My own career has stretched across forty-five years, now, which means I have been a professional writer longer, as of 1999, than Will Jenkins had been that day in 1956. The Eisenhower presidency is farther away in time from Bill Clinton's than Warren Harding's was from Eisenhower. And now one of today's new writers has asked me to locate the place where a story of hers goes off the tracks.

The wheel keeps turning; and we are swept along with it, boys and girls turning into men and women, green new writers becoming eminences grises. I was a kid just starting out, that day when John Campbell and Will Jenkins read my story before my very eyes and Jenkins told Campbell how I ought to fix it. Long, long ago . . . and how bright the memory of that strange hour remains in my mind. O

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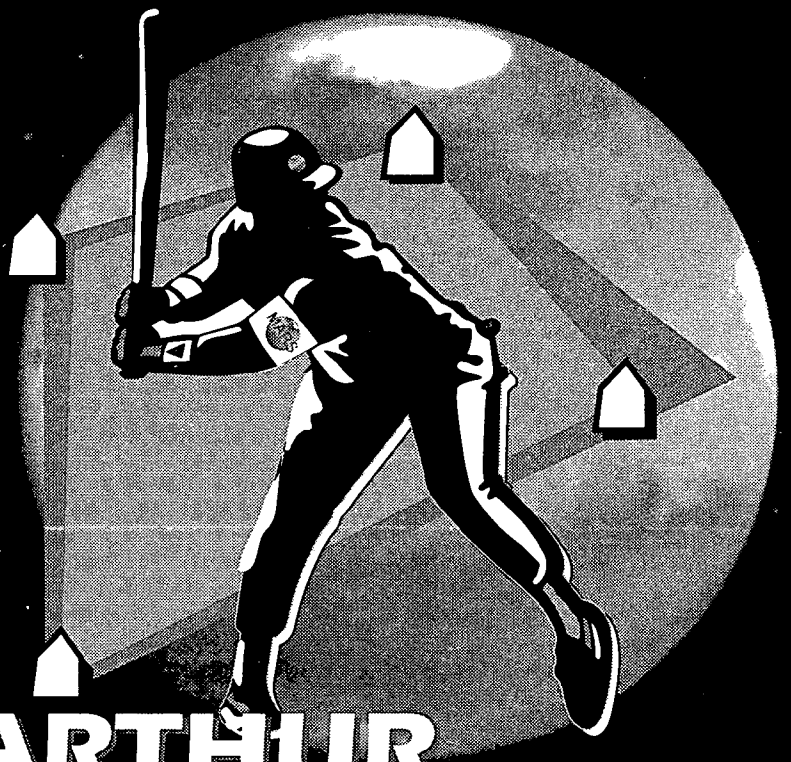

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He was a tall skinny Martian kid, shy and stooping. Gangly as a puppy. Why they had him playing third base I have no idea. Then again they had me playing shortstop and I'm left-handed. And can't field grounders. But I'm American so there I was. That's what learning a sport by video will do. Some things are so obvious people never think to mention them. Like never put a lefty at shortstop. But on Mars they were making it all new. Some people there had fallen in love with baseball, and ordered the equipment and rolled some fields, and off they went.

So there we were, me and this kid Gregor, butchering the left side of the infield. He looked so young I asked him how old he was, and he said eight and I thought Jeez you're not *that* young, but realized he meant Martian years of course, so he was about sixteen or seventeen, but he seemed younger. He had recently moved to Argyre from somewhere else, and was staying at the local house of his co-op with relatives or friends, I never got that straight, but he seemed pretty lonely to me. He never missed practice even though he was the worst of a terrible team, and clearly he got frustrated at all his errors and strike-outs. I used to wonder why he came out at all. And so shy; and that stoop; and the acne; and the tripping over his own feet, the blushing, the mumbling—he was a classic.

English wasn't his first language, either. It was Armenian, or Moravian, something like that. Something no one else spoke, anyway, except for an elderly couple in his co-op. So he mumbled what passes for English on Mars, and sometimes even used a translation box, but basically tried never to be in a situation where he had to speak. And made error after error. We must have made quite a sight—me about waist-high to him, and both of us letting grounders pass through us like we were a magic show. Or else knocking them down and chasing them around, then winging them past the first baseman. We very seldom made an out. It would have been conspicuous except everyone else was the same way. Baseball on Mars was a high-scoring game.

But beautiful anyway. It was like a dream, really. First of all the horizon, when you're on a flat plain like Argyre, is only three miles away rather than six. It's very noticeable to a Terran eye. Then their diamonds have just over normal-sized infields, but the outfields have to be huge. At my team's ballpark it was nine hundred feet to dead center, seven hundred down the lines. Standing at the plate the outfield fence was like a little green line off in the distance, under a purple sky, pretty near the horizon itself—what I'm telling you is that the baseball diamond about covered *the entire visible world.* It was so great.

They played with four outfielders, like in softball, and still the alleys between fielders were wide. And the air was about as thin as at Everest base camp, and the gravity itself only bats .380, so to speak. So when you hit the ball solid it flies like a golf ball hit by a big driver. Even as big as the fields were, there were still a number of home runs every game. Not many shutouts on Mars. Not till I got there anyway.

I went there after I climbed Olympus Mons, to help them establish a new soil sciences institute. They had the sense not to try that by video. At first I climbed in the Charitums in my time off, but after I got hooked into baseball the game took up most of my spare time. Fine, I'll play, I said when they asked me. But I won't coach. I don't like telling people what to do.

So I'd go out and start by doing soccer exercises with the rest of them, warming up all the muscles we would never use. Then Werner would start

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hitting infield practice, and Gregor and I would start flailing. We were like matadors. Occasionally we'd snag one and whale it over to first, and occasionally the first baseman, who was well over two meters tall and built like a tank, would catch our throws, and we'd slap our gloves together. Doing this day after day Gregor got a little less shy with me, though not much. And I saw that he threw the ball pretty damned hard. His arm was as long as my whole body, and boneless it seemed, like something pulled off a squid, so loose-wristed that he got some real pop on the ball. Of course sometimes it would still be rising when it passed ten meters over the first baseman's head, but it was moving, no doubt about it. I began to see that maybe the reason he came out to play, beyond just being around people he didn't have to talk to, was the chance to throw things really hard. I saw too that he wasn't so much shy as he was surly. Or both.

Anyway our fielding was a joke. Hitting went a bit better. Gregor learned to chop down on the ball and hit grounders up the middle; it was pretty effective. And I began to get my timing together. Coming to it from years of slow-pitch softball, I had started by swinging at everything a week late, and between that and my shortstopping I'm sure my teammates figured they had gotten a defective American. And since they had a rule limiting each team to only two Terrans, no doubt they were disappointed by that. But slowly I adjusted my timing, and after that I hit pretty well. The thing was their pitchers had no breaking stuff. These big guys would rear back and throw as hard as they could, like Gregor, but it took everything in their power just to throw strikes. It was a little scary because they often threw right at you by accident. But if they got it down the pipe then all you had to do was time it. And if you hit one, how the ball flew! Every time I connected it was like a miracle. It felt like you could put one into orbit if you hit it right, in fact that was one of their nicknames for a home run, Oh that's orbital they would say, watching one leave the park headed for the horizon. They had a little bell, like a ship's bell, attached to the backstop, and every time someone hit one out they would ring that bell while you rounded the bases. A very nice local custom.

So I enjoyed it. It's a beautiful game even when you're butchering it. My sorest muscles after practice were in my stomach from laughing so hard. I even began to have some success at short. When I caught balls going to my right I twirled around backward to throw to first or second. People were impressed though of course it was ridiculous. It was a case of the one-eyed man in the country of the blind. Not that they weren't good athletes, you understand, but none of them had played as kids, and so they had no baseball instincts. They just liked to play. And I could see why—out there on a green field as big as the world, under a purple sky, with the yellow-green balls flying around—it was beautiful. We had a good time.

I started to give a few tips to Gregor, too, though I had sworn to myself not to get into coaching. I don't like trying to tell people what to do. The game's too hard for that. But I'd be hitting flies to the outfielders, and it was hard not to tell them to watch the ball and run under it and then put the glove up and catch it, rather than run all the way with their arms stuck up like the Statue of Liberty's. Or when they took turns hitting flies (it's harder than it looks) giving them batting tips. And Gregor and I played catch all the time during warm-ups, so just watching me—and trying to throw to such a short target—he got better. He definitely threw hard. And I saw there was a whole lot of movement in his throws. They'd come tailing in

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to me every which way, no surprise given how loose-wristed he was. I had to look sharp or I'd miss. He was out of control, but he had potential.

And the truth was, our pitchers were bad. I loved the guys, but they couldn't throw strikes if you paid them. They'd regularly walk ten or twenty batters every game, and these were five-inning games. Werner would watch Thomas walk ten, then he'd take over in relief and walk ten more himself. Sometimes they'd go through this twice. Gregor and I would stand there while the other team's runners walked by as in a parade, or a line at the grocery store. When Werner went to the mound I'd stand by Gregor and say, You know Gregor you could pitch better than these guys. You've got a good arm. And he would look at me horrified, muttering No no no no, not possible.

But then one time warming up he broke off a really mean curve and I caught it on my wrist. While I was rubbing it down I walked over to him. Did you see the way that ball curved? I said.

Yes, he said, looking away. I'm sorry.

Don't be sorry, That's called a curveball, Gregor. It can be a useful throw. You twisted your hand at the last moment and the ball came over the top of it, like this, see? Here, try it again.

So we slowly got into it. I was all-state in Connecticut my senior year in high school, and it was all from throwing junk—curve, slider, split-finger, change. I could see Gregor throwing most of those just by accident, but to keep from confusing him I just worked on a straight curve. I told him Just throw it to me like you did that first time.

I thought you weren't to coach us, he said.

I'm not coaching you! Just throw it like that. Then in the games throw it straight. As straight as possible.

He mumbled a bit at me in Moravian, and didn't look me in the eye. But he did it. And after a while he worked up a good curve. Of course the thinner air on Mars meant there was little for the balls to bite on. But I noticed that the blue dot balls they played with had higher stitching than the red dot balls. They played with both of them as if there was no difference, but there was. So I filed that away and kept working with Gregor.

We practiced a lot. I showed him how to throw from the stretch, figuring that a wind-up from Gregor was likely to end up in knots. And by mid-season he threw a mean curve from the stretch. We had not mentioned this to anyone else. He was wild with it, but it hooked hard; I had to be really sharp to catch some of them. It made me better at shortstop too. Although finally in one game, behind twenty to nothing as usual, a batter hit a towering pop fly and I took off running back on it, and the wind kept carrying it and I kept following it, until when I got it I was out there sprawled between our startled center fielders.

Maybe you should play outfield, Werner said.

I said Thank God.

So after that I played left center or right center, and I spent the games chasing line drives to the fence and throwing them back in to the cut-off man. Or more likely, standing there and watching the other team take their walks. I called in my usual chatter, and only then did I notice that no one on Mars ever yelled anything at these games. It was like playing in a league of deaf-mutes. I had to provide the chatter for the whole team from two hundred yards away in center field, including of course criticism of the plate umpires' calls. My view of the plate was miniaturized but I still did a

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better job than they did, and they knew it too. It was fun. People would walk by and say, Hey there must be an American out there.

One day after one of our home losses, 28 to 12 I think it was, everyone went to get something to eat, and Gregor was just standing there looking off into the distance. You want to come along? I asked him, gesturing after the others, but he shook his head. He had to get back home and work. I was going back to work myself, so I walked with him into town, a place like you'd see in the Texas panhandle. I stopped outside his co-op, which was a big house or little apartment complex, I could never tell which was which on Mars. There he stood like a lamp post, and I was about to leave when an old woman came out and invited me in. Gregor had told her about me, she said in stiff English. So I was introduced to the people in the kitchen there, most of them incredibly tall. Gregor seemed really embarrassed, he didn't want me being there, so I left as soon as I could get away. The old woman had a husband, and they seemed like Gregor's grandparents. There was a young girl there too, about his age, looking at both of us like a hawk. Gregor never met her eye.

Next time at practice, I said, Gregor, were those your grandparents?

Like my grandparents.

And that girl, who was she?

No answer.

Like a cousin or something?

Yes.

Gregor, what about your parents? Where are they?

He just shrugged and started throwing me the ball.

I got the impression they lived in another branch of his co-op somewhere else, but I never found out for sure. A lot of what I saw on Mars I liked—the way they run their businesses together in co-ops takes a lot of pressure off them, and they live pretty relaxed lives compared to us on Earth. But some of their parenting systems—kids brought up by groups, or by one parent, or whatever—I wasn't so sure about those. It makes for problems if you ask me. Bunch of teenage boys ready to slug somebody. Maybe that happens no matter what you do.

Anyway we finally got to the end of the season, and I was going to go back to Earth after it. Our team's record was three and fifteen, and we came in last place in the regular season standings. But they held a final weekend tournament for all the teams in the Argyre Basin, a bunch of three-inning games, as there were a lot to get through. Immediately we lost the first game and were in the loser's bracket. Then we were losing the next one too, and all because of walks, mostly. Werner relieved Thomas for a time, then when that didn't work out Thomas went back to the mound to re-relieve Werner. When that happened I ran all the way in from center to join them on the mound. I said Look you guys, let Gregor pitch.

Gregor! they both said. No way!

He'll be even worse than us, Werner said.

How could he be? I said. You guys just walked eleven batters in a row. Night will fall before Gregor could do that.

So they agreed to it. They were both discouraged at that point, as you might expect. So I went over to Gregor and said Okay, Gregor, you give it a try now.

Oh no, no no no no no no no. He was pretty set against it. He glanced up into the stands where we had a couple hundred spectators, mostly friends

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and family and some curious passersby, and I saw then that his like-grandparents and his girl something-or-other were up there watching. Gregor was getting more hangdog and sullen every second.

Come on Gregor, I said, putting the ball in his glove. Tell you what, I'll catch you. It'll be just like warming up. Just keep throwing your curveball. And I dragged him over to the mound.

So Werner warmed him up while I went over and got on the catcher's gear, moving a box of blue dot balls to the front of the ump's supply area while I was at it. I could see Gregor was nervous, and so was I. I had never caught before, and he had never pitched, and bases were loaded and no one was out. It was an unusual baseball moment.

Finally I was geared up and I clanked on out to him. Don't worry about throwing too hard, I said. Just put the curveball right in my glove. Ignore the batter. I'll give you the sign before every pitch; two fingers for curve, one for fastball.

Fastball? he says.

That's where you throw the ball fast. Don't worry about that. We're just going to throw curves anyway.

And you said you weren't to coach, he said bitterly.

I'm not coaching, I said, I'm catching.

So I went back and got set behind the plate. Be looking for curveballs, I said to the ump. Curve ball? he said.

So we started up. Gregor stood crouched on the mound like a big praying mantis, red-faced and grim. He threw the first pitch right over our heads to the backstop. Two guys scored while I retrieved it, but I threw out the runner going from first to third. I went out to Gregor. Okay, I said, the bases are cleared and we got an out. Let's just throw now. Right into the glove. Just like last time, but lower.

So he did. He threw the ball at the batter, and the batter bailed, and the ball cut right down into my glove. The umpire was speechless. I turned around and showed him the ball in my glove. That was a strike, I told him.

Strike! he hollered. He grinned at me. That was a curveball, wasn't it.

Damn right it was.

Hey, the batter said. What was that?

We'll show you again, I said.

And after that Gregor began to mow them down. I kept putting down two fingers, and he kept throwing curveballs. By no means were they all strikes, but enough were to keep him from walking too many batters. All the balls were blue dot. The ump began to get into it.

And between two batters I looked behind me and saw that the entire crowd of spectators, and all the teams not playing at that moment, had congregated behind the backstop to watch Gregor pitch. No one on Mars had ever seen a curveball before, and now they were crammed back there to get the best view of it, gasping and chattering at every hook. The batter would bail or take a weak swing and then look back at the crowd with a big grin, as if to say Did you see that? That was a curveball!

So we came back and won that game, and we kept Gregor pitching, and we won the next three games as well. The third game he threw exactly twenty-seven pitches, striking out all nine batters with three pitches each. Walter Feller once struck out all twenty-seven batters in a high school game; it was like that.

The crowd was loving it. Gregor's face was less red. He was standing

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straighter in the box. He still refused to look anywhere but at my glove, but his look of grim terror had shifted to one of ferocious concentration. He may have been skinny, but he was tall. Out there on the mound he began to look pretty damned formidable.

So we climbed back up into the winner's bracket, then into a semi-final. Crowds of people were coming up to Gregor between games to get him to sign their baseballs. Mostly he looked dazed, but at one point I saw him glance up at his co-op family in the stands and wave at them, with a brief smile.

How's your arm holding out? I asked him.

What do you mean? he said.

Okay, I said. Now look, I want to play outfield again this game. Can you pitch to Werner? Because there were a couple of Americans on the team we played next, Ernie and Caesar, who I suspected could hit a curve. I just had a hunch.

Gregor nodded, and I could see that as long as there was a glove to throw at, nothing else mattered. So I arranged it with Werner, and in the semi-finals I was back out in right-center field. We were playing under the lights by this time, the field like green velvet under a purple twilight sky. Looking in from center field it was all tiny, like something in a dream.

And it must have been a good hunch I had, because I made one catch charging in on a liner from Ernie, sliding to snag it, and then another running across the middle for what seemed like thirty seconds, before I got under a towering Texas leaguer from Caesar. Gregor even came up and congratulated me between innings.

And you know that old thing about how a good play in the field leads to a good at-bat. Already in the day's games I had hit well, but now in this semi-final I came up and hit a high fastball so solid it felt like I didn't hit it at all, and off it flew. Home run over the center field fence, out into the dusk. I lost sight of it before it came down.

Then in the finals I did it again in the first inning, back-to-back with Thomas—his to left, mine again to center. That was two in a row for me, and we were winning, and Gregor was mowing them down. So when I came up again the next inning I was feeling good, and people were calling out for another homer, and the other team's pitcher had a real determined look. He was a really big guy, as tall as Gregor but massive-chested as so many Martians are, and he reared back and threw the first one right at my head. Not on purpose, he was out of control. Then I barely fouled several pitches off, swinging very late, and dodging his inside heat, until it was a full count, and I was thinking to myself Well heck, it doesn't really matter if you strike out here, at least you hit two in a row.

Then I heard Gregor shouting Come on, coach, you can do it! Hang in there! Keep your focus! All doing a passable imitation of me, I guess, as the rest of the team was laughing its head off. I suppose I had said all those things to them before, though of course it was just the stuff you always say automatically at a ball game, I never meant anything by it, I didn't even know people heard me. But I definitely heard Gregor, needling me, and I stepped back into the box thinking Look I don't even like to coach, I played ten games at shortstop trying not to coach you guys, and I was so irritated I was barely aware of the pitch, but hammered it anyway out over the right field fence, higher and deeper even than my first two. Knee-high fastball, inside. As Ernie said to me afterward, You *drove* that baby. My teammates

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rang the little ship's bell all the way around the bases, and I slapped hands with every one of them on the way from third to home, feeling the grin on my face. Afterward I sat on the bench and felt the hit in my hands. I can still see it flying out.

So we were ahead 4-0 in the final inning, and the other team came up determined to catch us. Gregor was tiring at last, and he walked a couple, then hung a curve and their big pitcher got into it and clocked it far over my head. Now I do okay charging liners, but the minute a ball is hit over me I'm totally lost. So I turned my back on this one and ran for the fence, figuring either it goes out or I collect it against the fence, but that I'd never see it again in the air. But running on Mars is so weird. You get going too fast and then you're pinwheeling along trying to keep from doing a faceplant. That's what I was doing when I saw the warning track, and looked back up and spotted the ball coming down, so I jumped, trying to jump straight up, you know, but I had a lot of momentum, and had completely forgotten about the gravity, so I shot up and caught the ball, amazing, but found myself *flying right over the fence.*

I came down and rolled in the dust and sand, and the ball stayed stuck in my glove. I hopped back over the fence holding the ball up to show everyone I had it. But they gave the other pitcher a home run anyway, because you have to stay inside the park when you catch one, it's a local rule. I didn't care. The whole point of playing games is to make you do things like that anyway. And it was good that that pitcher got one too.

So we started up again and Gregor struck out the side, and we won the tournament. We were mobbed, Gregor especially. He was the hero of the hour. Everyone wanted him to sign something. He didn't say much, but he wasn't stooping either. He looked surprised. Afterward Werner took two balls and everyone signed them, to make some kind-of trophies for Gregor and me. Later I saw half the names on my trophy were jokes, "Mickey Mantle" and other names like that. Gregor had written on it "Hi Coach Arnold, Regards Greg." I have the ball still, on my desk at home. ❍

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William H. Keith, Jr.

FOSSILS

William H. Keith, Jr., is a science fiction and technothriller writer who has published around fifty novels. His current titles include *Semper Mars*, by "Ian Douglas," released in May from Avon Eos, and *Diplomatic Act*, by Mr. Keith and Peter Jurasik, which will be out soon. "Fossils," a story about a new kind of generation gap, is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

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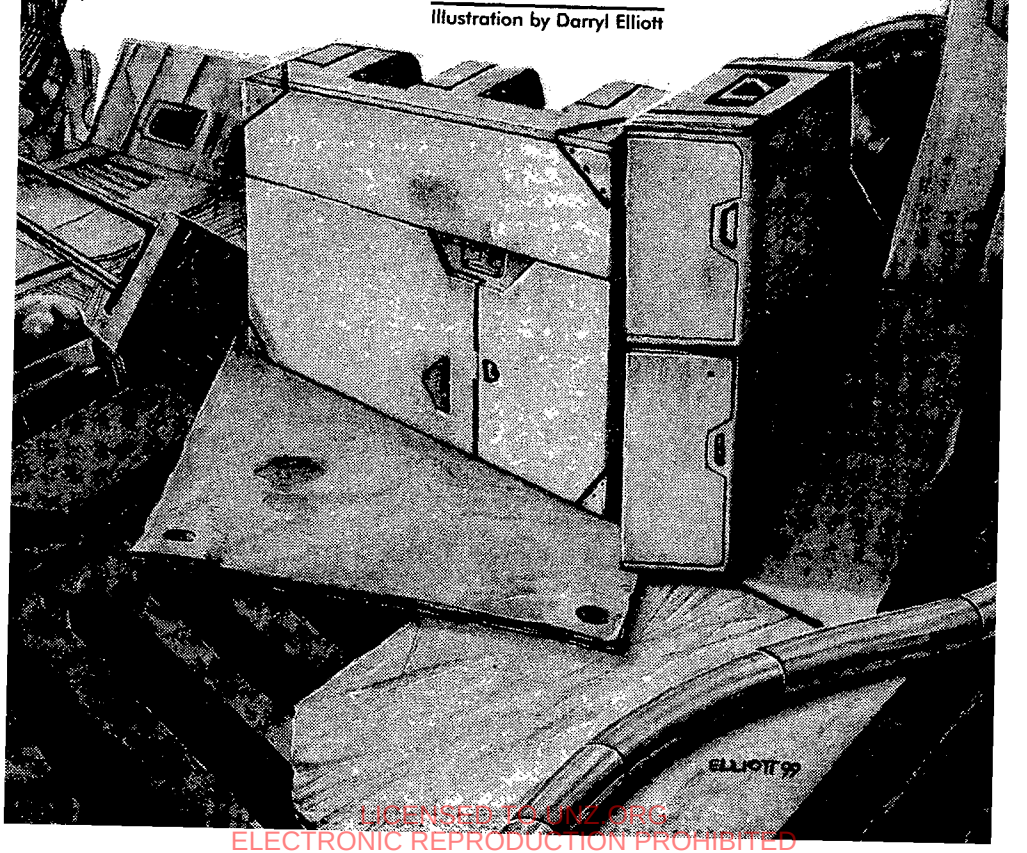

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Norris, his nomen was, *Paul* Norris, which should link you the idea. Zet, firmative. A fuzzy scuzzy. An oldie, original-strain human, zero prosthetics and negative 'plants, not even so much as a companion. Oldie chronologically, too. The Net linked down with the dat—a nate date of 301.34. Eighty-eight stadyers? An eyeblink, sure, but going on pure biological, the geezie was *old.*

Old bio, and old neural processing, which is worse. Wetware mud, link me? Norris had been nated on Earth, down among the teeming billions. Emigrated to Pittsburgh, Mars, in 325. Married Ann Whittaker . . . had to link the Net to find what *that* meant. He was *old.*

He wasn't at his domie when I downtouched my floater, and, for a blink or two, I thought the geezie'd given his firmative after all and lifted out. That would've been the pos-linked thing to do, of course, but one thing I've assimmed from the evacuation is the rampant illogic of OS-homies. Wetware mud runs thick and it runs deep. They claim they're conscious, but by the day before Impact, I was beginning to have my doubts.

Look, I'm no bigot! The Old-Strains *made* us, after all, and their genes formed the basis of those parts of amortal bodies that are still organic. They gave us form, gave us shape, gave us the *stars,* for Life's sake . . . and I'm not going to static them just because they're slow. But *talking* to one of them can be like talking to an ancient gigabit processor, pre-AI: slow, single-minded, and positively complacent in its determination that it's right, and never mind what the rest of the universe has to say.

Where *was* he, anyway? Ah. When I shifted to IR, there was a heat smear to the south, against the cliff wall. Couldn't tell what he was doing, but it had to be him. Everyone else, amortal, AI, and human, had been evacuated from this part of the Valles days ago. Everyone but *him.*

I took a sec, then, to scan the scenic. Oldies claim we don't feel like they do. Zet. Untrue. If anything, we feel *more* . . . deeper, sharper, truer, keener, with more range and grasp and holosense than their brains can process, but it's all in control and it kicks in when *we* decide. I've seen Saturn's rings and I've skimmed the cloudtops of Jove, watched a double sunrise from the north rim of the Caloris Basin and looked back at a shrunken, void-lonely Sol from a tumbling ice mountain in the remotes of the Kuiper Belt. I've seen. I've recorded. I've *felt.*

Paul Norris had planted his domie in scenic intensivity. Eos Chasma—the Chasm of the Dawn—gold-red cliffs like holos I've DLed of Earth's Grand Canyon, but three times deeper. It was already dark down here at the bottom, but the upper third of those cliffs gleamed in the sunset like firestruck opal and red-banded gold. For twenty-one stadyers, he'd lived in this same spot, on the rock-scattered regolith floor of the Eos Chasma, a few hundred mets from the south wall. Side channel, observation: the canyon floor base level here registered at the *minus* three-kil line, and the surrounding cliff tops soared almost vertical to plus two or three kils. Six kilometers is a *long* way down, deep enough that there were crevasses and deepfolds that never saw the sun even at local noon on the equinox, and I figured that old Paul had chosen the spot for a ready source of fossil ice. I was right, as it turned out, but not for the reason I thought.

Anyway, it was the chasm's depth that was the problem. My timesense

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told me we had another seven hours fourteen before a quite literal hell broke loose. I had to reach him, somehow, and I was just now realizing that I didn't understand humans nearly as well as I'd thought when I volunteered for this.

I gave his domie a light scan first. It hadn't been much to begin with—a Type 12 Mars hut, a steel and durplast cylinder sliced in half down the long axis, twelve mets long and maybe four wide. Airlock on one end, a fusion pod and air bleeder on the other. External strap-on tanks for air reserves and water. State of the colonizing art fifty years ago, but no room for the amenities. Scarcely room for visitors, if it came to that.

The geezie had been busy, though. He'd used a digger to excavate all around the hut, clear down to the slab, and then, Life alone knows how, he'd rigged monomol cables around the thing, constructed a block and tackle suspended from a homemade gantry, and somehow rolled the whole thing over on its back, round side down, slab side up. He had a ladder rigged from the side of the hole going down to his airlock entrance, so he could get in and out. Why? It made no sense.

There were other strangenesses. An old lobber rested in the sand, stripped and partly dismantled. A crude sign had been erected on a post nearby, hand-painted on precious wood salvaged from a cargo pallet long ago: NORRIS ENTERPRISES. Directional markers were fixed to the pole beneath. One pointed west: PITTSBURG, MARS—3598 KM, it read. The other angled almost straight up: PITTSBURG, PA. 230,000,000 km. (MEAN).

That made no sense, either. Was it possible that Paul was suffering from dementia? Extreme biological age will do that to oldies who are isolated and not taking their insurance meds. We might be able to do something for him then, if that was the case.

I would know more when I spoke with him. I opened channel 4, standard suit-to-suit, to give him a call.

"*Chriiiiissst,* what a beauty!" His voice, coming over the radio link, startled me. I hadn't thought he'd noticed my arrival . . . but a few seconds later I realized that he was unaware of my presence. He was talking to . . . someone else.

"You remember the first one of these we found, Ann?" he asked aloud. "That was . . . what? A couple of months after we came here. We were still working for the Arean Museum and living in that little co-op hab on the South Side of Pittsburgh. Remember? The first site we started prospecting, over in Ius Chasma. It was just a little one, the size of your little finger, but it was perfect. *Perfect!* Fetched a decent price up in Denver-Olympus, too, as I recall. Ayuh. Gave us the stake we needed t'get out of six-to-a-room and set up on our own."

His speech was slow . . . *slow,* like the rambling drawl of a voice-recording played at quarter speed. Wetware mud. As I walked toward him, I adjusted my processing cycles, slowing my thought . . . and my speech. I'd forgotten how slow OS brains could be. I would have to adjust my linguistic paradigms as well to embrace his oldie dialect and narrow my speech to a single channel, or he would never understand me.

"Then there was that spirelliate the girls found," he went on, "that spring in Tithonium. *That* was a find! Remember how they bounced in that afternoon, all excited about that 'funny, twisty thing' they'd spotted high up among the rocks. . . ?"

"Citizen Norris?" I said, interrupting his monologue.

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"Who the hell's that?" His voice sounded quicker now, with a bright snap of emotion that was probably surprise.

I downshifted my cycles again, trying for a match. Ahead, the heat smear shifted and moved, and I switched to visual optics. Norris was a small man, clumsy in an ancient Model 15 Marsuit, with a blue helmet bright against the rust-red rock of the cliff wall. His digger, an even more ancient wheeled robexcavator, crouched at his side, illuminating whatever he'd been working on with a glare of light.

"Excuse the interruption, Citizen Norris." Zet, communication at this level was glacially slow! "I am . . . call me Cessair. I would like to speak with you, if I may."

"Well, I can't say I care t'talk *t'you!*" he said. He waved a laser cutter, not in a hostile manner but with definite emotional agitation. "Got nothin' t' say to th' likes of you or your kind!" I was close enough now to see his eyes narrow behind the visor of his helmet. "Huh. Ain't you cold?"

I glanced down at myself. I'd grown that body hours before for his benefit, but I suppose the context was anomalous enough to startle him. My skin appeared to be steaming as the moisture in it sublimed into the thin, cold air. I focused briefly, and my body grew a light skinsuit and bubble helmet, the latest fash in Marswear. "Better?"

"You Homo-A types've tinkered with the climate here quite a bit already," he drawled, "but the air pressure's still less than a hundredth of a bar, and the temp right now is, what? Minus ten, minus fifteen Celsius? A bit frosty for you t'be sportin' about in nothin' but your skin. 'Course, you ain't really human, are ya?"

They'd warned me in Deimos that he might be an anti-amortal bigot. "I am human," I told him, "within the parameters of humanity as detailed in the Sentients' Declaration of 68.83. My genetic makeup is entirely human, derived from Original-Strain DNA. Both my genetic and electronic prostheses are—"

"Aw, cut yer yappin'. I don't care where you came from, s'long as you git back there. The sooner the better."

"I merely wished to establish that I *am* human, Mr. Norris," I told him, dropping the words one at a time and wondering how these people could communicate this way. "Your descendant, as it were. I simply have more control over my metabolism and internal systems than you do . . . and a more intimate association with various AI enhancements, communications links, and cybernetic and computer implant control assets."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard all that. *Homo amortalis.* The new and improved Man. Get the hell out of my way. Yer blockin' my light."

He was attempting to lever something up out of a shallow hole in the ground at the base of the cliff. The way the light gleamed from the smooth and translucent surface, I thought it must be water ice.

"Can I help you?" Without waiting for an answer, I reached down and grasped the block he was struggling with. Allowing my fingers to heat momentarily, I melted a grip for myself, then hauled the block free, rolling it clear of the trench he'd dug. More ice glittered beneath the digger's worklights, a buried treasure lost for a billion years beneath the ocher sand.

"*Woof!*" he said, and the condensation of his breath momentarily clouded the lower half of his visor. "Thanks! Even here a chunk like that must weigh fifty kilos! And I'm not as spry as I used t'be, not by a damned long shot!"

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I glanced at his find, then took a more deliberate look. There was something there, shadows motionlessly coiled within the ice.

"What is it?" I asked, letting my fingers drag across the cold, slick surface. "Is that—"

The ice was filled with . . . shapes. *Familiar* shapes. One lay just beneath the surface, a dark and twisting shadow under the worklights. It looked like a *Helica* species . . . but the thing was larger and more finely wrought than any specimen I'd seen before, a wonder of two intricate, flattened, left-handed spiraling tubes, weaving about one another in an odd and exquisitely delicate mimicry of DNA. Spines bristled about the soft part of the body, which sprouted finger-length tentacles.

"*Helica* species," Norris said, grinning behind his visor despite his earlier bad humor. "But I ain't never seen one this big before. Long as my forearm! Ain't she a beauty, Ann? *Ain't* she a beauty?"

"Who is this Ann you keep talking to?" I asked. "Our records indicate that Ann Whittaker Norris died twelve stadyers ago."

With a strength I'd not thought he possessed in that skinny frame, Norris rolled, levered, and hoisted the ice block up and onto the cargo bed of the robexcavator, gentling it down onto a sheet of insulation that he carefully tucked over and around his find. Without another word, he gathered up his tools, stowed them on the digger, then stalked back across the sand toward his Mars hut, brushing roughly against me as he passed. The robexcavator trundled off in his footsteps, and I had to jump aside to avoid being bumped.

I glanced inside the trench he'd dug and could just make out other shapes in the ice a meter beneath the surface. Fossils are common on Mars. Microfossils found in an Antarctic meteorite originally derived from Mars linked us the first clue to the existence of an ancient Arean biota, in fact, back in '27 or so, and the first manned explorations of the planet had discovered more . . . an entire zoo of organisms ranging from microfossils to giant helicas, creatures that had swum and crawled in the Martian ocean perhaps two to three billion years ago. Most were impressions in stone . . . but a number of ice fossils had been found as well, organisms frozen intact, like the mammoths uncovered from time to time in Alaskan and Siberian glaciers. The Martian seas had been teeming when their last, evaporating remnants had frozen solid and the atmosphere had thinned away to near nonexistence.

Affirm. There'd been quite an intense debate revolving around the existence of those fossils whenever we'd proposed terraforming Mars. When the Boreal Sea once again covered the northern lowlands after being lost for two billion years beneath the shifting sands, a lot of Martian fossils would be lost, submerged to depths of a kilometer or more.

Well, such relatively minor downchecks were inevitable in the face of transforming a planet. In exchange, Humankind would get a new, green world, as fair and as habitable as Earth herself. No more domes, habs, or Mars huts. No more pressure suits and air bleeders. It was an old dream, a dream that the AIs and Amortals are morphing into reality. It was pure coincidence that we'd named the program Project Eos—Eos Chasma, the Canyon of the Dawn; Project Eos, the dawn of new life on long-dead Mars.

You would think the current inhabitants of the planet would welcome the change, even if they would not live to see it completed, even if they had to accept some slight inconvenience. Zet. OS human selfishness and shortsightedness were incomprehensible at times . . . *most* times, in fact.

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Turning, I started back toward Norris's up-ended Mars hut, wondering how it was possible to even attempt reasoning with such a creature.

I found another wooden marker along the way, not far from the hut. It was a cross, painted white, with Ann Norris's name and the oldstyle dates 2273-2347 hand-printed on the crosspiece. Twelve years of sandblasting had smoothed the wood to a silky sheen, but the cross had obviously been lovingly repainted many times.

Our information had been correct. Ann Norris had died in 377. Did he really imagine he was talking to her?

He said nothing as he powered down the digger near his Mars hut, offloaded the ice block and stored it in a cryocase. There were five other such cases, I noticed, lined up in a row awaiting storage. At the entrance to the upside-down Mars hut, he stopped and seemed to dither. "I 'spose you want t'come inside."

Mars was still frontier world enough that hospitality rituals prevailed. You *always* invite the traveler in for some refreshment, some conversation, and a PLSS recharge. I'd been counting on that. "I need to talk to you, Paul. I promise that I won't make you do anything you don't want to do, but I *must* talk to you."

Could it be that he actually welcomed the company, just then? I'd expected an argument, hospitality rituals or no, with a savage demand that I get off his landhold, but he seemed to sag a little inside his suit, and then nodded. "C'mon in, then, if y'must. Mind yer step on the ladder."

As I walked toward the ladder, I noticed an interesting touch he'd added to the inverted Mars hut. On the corner, just beneath the overhang of the foundation slab, were the words, in broad slaps of red paint, NORRIS'S ARK.

I had the feeling there was some humorous wordplay there, but I did not understand the point.

It took time to cycle through the airlock. It was an old model, of course, and he had to be meticulously careful not to let the powder-fine, red Martian dust clinging to his suit enter his domie. Lots of the ancient Martian regolith is charged with hyperperoxides, and some of the salts are downright toxic. I got through simply by negating the static charge on my skinsuit; I considered shedding it again but remembered his reaction earlier and decided to keep it, all but the helmet. Paul Norris was old enough that he might still have mindtwists like nudity taboos. I needed his cooperation and didn't want to stress him.

I stepped through the inner lock close behind him, and it was like stepping into another world.

The stink was overpowering, a mind-numbing assault of odors associated primarily with *Staphylococcus epidermidis* and a variety of fungi and molds, but mingled with others ranging from decaying fruit to human excreta. As overpowering as the odor was the sheer confused jumble of the Mars hut's interior, crammed almost to closure by crates and storage canisters and packing material, by partially dismantled equipment, by torn-down partitions and a forest of multicolored wires spilling from consoles, power packs, and antique control circuits. *Wires!* I hadn't realized that such things still existed on Mars.

"Heh," he said, squeezing between a pair of strapped-down plastic crates. Beneath his suit he'd been wearing the bulky, padded folds of an undersuit garment, and it gave him a soft and clumsy look. "Sorry for the mess. Weren't expectin' t'be doin' any *entertainin'* today."

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Took a moment to turn down some of the input . . . especially the odors. Norris didn't seem to notice that throat-gagging cacophony of smells, and I wondered how he managed without being able to draw on internal life support. Maybe he'd just been living by himself too long. I tuned down some of the visual input, too. Too much detail, too much focus, too much clarity in a cluttered jumble like that could overload even advanced AI visual processors. Now I knew why OS-human eyes focused only a small area directly in the line of vision and let the periphery blur.

"What," I managed to say after a moment, "are you *doing* in here?"

It wasn't that Norris simply enjoyed living in clutter, though the clutter of Life only knows how many years living out in the desert played a part, certainly. Most of the hut's interior was taken up by hardfoam packing containers and more sealed cryocases, and most had been anchored in place by straps bolted to the walls and floor. Fossil specimens, casts and impressions in red Martian sandstone, littered most of the remaining floor.

"Movin' day," he said.

I glanced at him, but couldn't read the expression. In the center of the compartment, a relatively open and junk-free space was occupied by a seat that I recognized as having come from the dismantled lobber outside. The seat was affixed to a set of rotating gimbals, which would let it swing freely, remaining upright in any attitude. The engineering was remarkable, if less than precisionist neat.

"May I ask the *point* of all of this?"

"It's liable to get a little bouncy," he told me. Reaching up, he fondly patted one of the semicircular mounts within which the seat would freely swing to any attitude. "With this, I got half a chance of riding out your runaway."

"A chance?" I looked at him, disbelieving. "Paul, this is . . . is crazy. You will *not* survive."

He shrugged. "If I don't, I don't." His voice sharpened. "But I am *not* evacuating."

"Paul, I'm not sure you understand how serious this is. You *must* leave. Or you will . . ." I hesitated, then said the word with an effort. "Die."

He gave me a sharp look. "I thought you amortal-types only worried about your *own* deaths."

"You needn't be vulgar," I replied, shocked. "We are concerned with *all* life."

"Yeah, right. Even humans, huh?"

I turned, fixing him with a hard, scan-intense gaze. "Paul, do you hate or fear us, the amortals, I mean? Do you resent us or what we're doing here? Is that why you . . . why you're doing this?"

He looked away. "Don't rightly see how it's any of your business *what* I do here," he said. "I just want t'be left alone."

"Unfortunately, Paul, our . . . runaway, as you call it, has made that impossible. Even without it, you would have had to leave sooner or later. The Martian surface is not going to be stable—*safe*—for some centuries to come. CK-2023 merely hastened events. Sooner or later, you *would* have had to leave."

"Lady, I'm forty-seven years old."

I blinked. "Your records say you're eighty-eight."

He made a face. "That's *standard*. What you call a stadyer. I'm Martian, remember? Forty-seven. And what are you doing snooping around in my records?"

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"You came from Earth, originally."

"Ayuh. A long, long time ago." He sighed. "The point is, I don't have that much time left, do I? I was figurin' on bein' dead and gone by the time things changed enough that I would *have* to leave."

"No matter how well-laid plans may be, there is always room for error."

Stooping, I picked up one of the specimens Paul had left lying on the floor, partly wrapped in padding. He started forward, as though to take it from me, then stopped himself, making himself watch me finger the fragile, two-billion-year-old spine-studded crenelations of the spinotroch's shell. "Careful with that," he said.

"What is it?"

"Spine-wheel. Burrowed in the mud of the old sea bottoms."

I continued tracing the delicate outline, preserved perfectly in sandstone. "Interesting." Gently setting the fossil down, I looked up at the stacks of hard-foam containers already sealed and secured to the walls. "And these others?"

"Hell, I got thirty, mebbe forty different species collected here. Over seven hundred individual specimens. Centrophores. Placalophs. Camptohelians. Dihelians." He raised his hand, lightly touching one of the containers. "There's a lot of years of prospectin' in these here packages."

"An impressive collection."

"Too many to ferry out by lobber. Too many even t'pack out on a tractor back to Pittsburgh, assumin' they had a tractor free right now. Seems like everybody's busy haulin' tail out of the lowlands, these days." He snorted. "Hell, lady, why else do you think I'm going through all of this?"

I wasn't sure what to think. "Surely you understand," I said, "that the fact that a tractor was not made available to you means that your collection did not have a high priority."

"Not for *you,* mebbe," he said. "Or for the Arean Museum. But it has a damned high priority for *me.*"

"The Arean Museum already has all the fossil specimens it needs. So does Earth. The Arean biota is well recorded, both with fossil specimens and with DNA records."

"That's what they tell me."

"Why do you keep collecting them, then? Why are they so important to you?"

Paul scowled. "Hell, lady, y'might ask y'self why a guy's *life* is important to him! Me and Ann spent the better part of thirty-one years prospectin' for fossils out here, one place an' another. That's . . . what? Almost sixty of yer damned stadyers. We spent twenty-one of 'em right here in the Valles Marineris. Hell, collectin' fossils is all I know."

"If the areopaleontologists have already seen and described these species, there's no need to collect more, surely."

"Says *who?* You can't have too many specimens of a given life form, not if you want as complete a picture as possible of the thing. How big did it grow? How long did it live? What structural variations were there, when evolution started reshaping the thing?" Carefully, he reached down and picked up the spinotroch, cradling it in his hand. "For me, though, it's a matter of history, of . . . of *being.* Holding one of these, and knowing that it was alive and swimming, *right here,* when all Earth had to offer was blue-green algae."

He picked up a sheet of foam padding and began wrapping the fossil, using several layers before slipping the package inside one of the open hard-foam containers.

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"Besides," he continued. "There's always the chance of finding something new, something no one has ever seen before."

"A very small chance."

"Oh, you look long enough, you'll find things . . . *wonderful* things." He hesitated. "That specimen in the ice block I just hauled in. Found it by accident, when my digger was huntin' fer ice fer my reserves. Found it just five hundred meters from here, and me and Ann working this part of the Valles for twenty-one years and we never knew it was there. I think it's a new species, something never seen before. How much more must there be out there still, right under our noses like this thing was, and when you yank Mars out of its ice age it's all going to be destroyed."

"We are less concerned with the past, Paul, than we are with the future."

"I'm not talking about the past. I'm talking about *knowledge.* About who we are and where we came from and what else there is in this universe besides us."

"No, you're talking about your life as a fossil prospector," I told him. "I understand that . . . and I respect it. There will still be fossils for you to hunt and sell, if that's what you want."

"You don't need to be condescending with me, damn it!" His fists were clenched, the veins standing out on the backs of his hands like blue marbling. He began ticking points off on long, bony fingers. "In the first place, you know well as I do that the new ocean you're making is in the same spot as it used to be. Most fossils are gonna be lost . . . 'specially the ice fossils, which'll disintegrate when the ice melts. Second, the way I heard it, you're gonna be pulling everyone off Mars before too long, just because you figure it'll be too dangerous here on the surface for the next couple hundred years. So what am *I* supposed to do, living the rest of my life in one of your big space colonies? Ain't no fossils for me to hunt there, less you planted them there yourselves when you built the thing. Third, it's a damned crime what you amorts are doin' here. I'm not talkin' about the runaway. I just mean your terraforming idea. Who needs it?"

"Don't you want your descendants to walk on a fair, green world? One with air they can breathe, blue skies, open—"

"Aw, save it! It's cheaper t'build O'Neill microworlds, and you can make your gravity t'order. Me, I like a place that's got some *bite* to it!"

"Your people," I said slowly, "show an unusual tendency to attach themselves to a particular patch of land. Many of you have been . . . reluctant to move, despite the coming danger. We do not understand this."

He grinned. "I take it I'm not the only problem case, then."

I studied him a moment. I thought he was *enjoying* this. "No. No, you're not. Most of the older *sapiens* prefer to stay where they are. Even when they know that survival is unlikely."

"Maybe we like it where we are."

"That doesn't make sense! Surely, when life-threatening situations develop, it is best to leave, whatever the cost!"

"Have you ever stopped to look at the sunrise over the Valles scarp? When black fades to purple, then maroon, then orange, then pink . . . and fast, like. Less than a minute. The air's still too thin for lingering transition colors in the sky, you know."

"This is worth dying for?"

He chuckled. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. But it makes us sad to see beauty like that passing."

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"There will be beauty in the new world we create here. A new world, where men can walk and breathe without artifice."

"I'm sure. But that's, what? Two, three Martian centuries off, yet, before the atmosphere's thick enough to do away with pressure suits? And then another thousand years before your gene-tailored algae make the stuff breathable."

"We are terraforming Mars for *you* and *your* kind, Paul. We amortals can remake ourselves in any fashion we choose. But *Homo sapiens* need worlds like Mars, or the microworld colonies."

"Yeah, but *I'm* not gonna see it, am I? You take away my world *now* for the promise of paradise a thousand years from now. You amortals—well, there's no tellin' how long you folks have t'live. With downloadin' to new bodies and all, I guess mebbe you have a fair chance at livin' forever."

"Not forever, Paul. Nothing lasts forever." I cocked my head to the side. "Why do you choose to live here, Paul? That is the central question, the reason I was sent here to talk with you, after all. We need to understand you, Paul, if we are to help your kind in the future."

"Mebbe we don't *want* your help. *I* don't."

"You said that at forty-seven you don't have much time left, but you're still throwing away an extra ten or fifteen Martian years! *Good* years. And who's to say what advances might be made in nanomedtech and cyberimplants in that time? Paul, every human alive today has a chance to join us!"

He looked at me for a long time, then slowly shook his head. "Lady, that assumes we *want* t'live forever. Some of us don't."

"Paul, you can't mean that. I mean, you *are* trying to survive, aren't you?" I waved a hand at the seat and gimbals. "With all of this?"

He managed a smile. "That's the general idea." The smile faded. "There was a time, there, when I just didn't want to go on. But . . . well, it got better. Believe me, I *don't* want to die."

"Then come with me! Now!"

"To one of your resettlement microworlds?" He shook his head, a hard, jerky motion. "No thanks."

"You *do* resent us. What we're trying to do here. For *you*."

He shrugged. "Well, I can't deny I liked Mars the way it was. Mostly, though, I just wonder about the hurry. I always heard you folks were the ones t'take the long, patient view."

"Even in a plan spanning a thousand years," I said, "there must be a beginning."

He fixed me with a disapproving stare. "Man's been on this world for two hundred and thirty-one years, Cessair. That's well over four centuries, standard. That's not time to get to know something as big, as complicated as a *world*. There are wonders out there—"

"There must be a beginning, Paul. There must be a time when we say, 'enough planning, enough research. We will begin *now!*' After four centuries, we know all we need to know about Mars."

"We don't know all there is to know about *Earth* yet, Cessair, and Man's been there a damn sight longer than he's been here!"

"An opinion, Paul. One we do not share." I hesitated, considering, looking for a different mental tack. "Paul, we—all of us concerned with the evacuation—we want to help. We don't know why you are so stubbornly insisting on riding this out yourself, when there's no need!"

"Let's just say I'd rather do this on my own."

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"The resettlement will not be forever, a few years at most, until the end of the bombardment phase. Then you could return. Or you could elect to stay in the resettlement colony. Many of your people have chosen that option, you know. I believe your daughters have applied for long-term citizenship in Aldrin."

"They're grown. They can do what they want with their lives."

"It's a beautiful world, designed especially for you . . . Martians. You would be happy there."

"An inside-out world, with the other side of the place hanging over my head?" He chuckled, a dry, brittle sound. "No thanks! I prefer my sky wide-open and pink!"

"I thought humans prided themselves on being adaptable." It was a challenge.

"Exactly. We *are* adaptable. I'll adapt fine on my own. Right here."

"There is adaptable," I said, "and there is *stupid*." I spread my hands, imploring. *How* to get through to him? "Sooner or later, you will *all* have to leave, at least for a few centuries. The changes we've already introduced, well, things are going to be very risky here for a time. The runaway has only advanced the schedule a bit."

2

I didn't add that the Project Eos planners had embraced that advance. For fifty-one stadyers, now, we'd been dropping cometary chunks onto the northern hemisphere of Mars, each piece precisely controlled, each no more than a few tens of meters across, designed to vaporize in the slowly thickening atmosphere without causing major impacts or environmental threats. At the same time, huge, orbital mirrors, each a hundred kilometers across, were bathing the northern hemisphere in sunlight, raising the surface temperature. And the changes were happening, *had* been happening for twenty years. Already, the Boreal Sea was forming anew, liquid water once again flowing where an ocean had rolled two billion years before.

But the changes, even under tight control, were already wreaking havoc with a planetary surface essentially unchanged since the rising of the Tharsis Bulge a billion years back. Permafrost was melting across continent-sized regions, creating titanic sinkholes, Marsquakes, and mudslides of devastating proportions. The atmosphere had thickened twentyfold, further increasing temperatures, and accelerating the greenhouse effect. Open water was appearing in the lowest reaches of the northern basin, in Chryse and in Acidalia, as ancient subterranean ices melted. Within another century, we expected the ocean to be deep and warm enough that only the coastlines and north polar regions would freeze solid during north hemisphere winters. Then the *real* planetary engineering could begin.

But conditions were increasingly dangerous for humans on the Martian surface, especially in the northern permafrost belt and in low-lying canyons like the Valles Marineris. For the past ten stadyers, we'd been supervising the evacuation of humans living in the threatened regions—primarily the northern lowlands—to orbital microworld colonies like Aldrin.

But now—well, things had gotten out of hand. The next iceteroid in line had gone wrong.

CK-2023 had started out as a resident of the Kuiper Belt, that band of

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cold, dark asteroids, comets, and Pluto-sized iceballs orbiting the fringes of Sol's kingdom out beyond Neptune. Terraforming engineers—including an AI with the nomen of Ep-74 Far Thinking, who probably knew more about orbital mechanics and gravitational vectoring than any other sentient AI, CE, amortal, or oldie in existence—had set up the move, planting drivers that sent CK-2023 sunward on a long, patient curve that flicked close in around Jupiter 43 stadyers later. The calcs called for a tidal breakup as that chunk of ice swung past Jove, aided by some judiciously planted nuclear charges. The idea was to disperse the chunk into a pearlstring of impacters, none more than a few hundred mets across, all on a collision course with Mars well above the forty-degree-latitude line.

So . . . what went wrong? We still don't know, and it's likely that the reason is lost somewhere beneath the blur of chaos and random event. CK-2023 fragmented, but not cleanly. One fragment was four hundred mets across and over two kilometers long, and as it swept past Jupiter and whipped around toward the Inner System, it picked up a hard-spinning tumble that made further landings impossible. Various schemes were calced and simmed, schemes employing missiles, lasers, particle beams, every weapon, in fact, that could be found in their dusty storage facilities on Earth and elsewhere. Since the amortals and AIs had assumed the responsibilities for what had passed as a government among *sapiens*, there'd been scant need for high-powered weaponry. An antimatter beam might have sufficed, but we could not generate that much antimatter in time. In fact, every sim we ran showed the same outcome. There was no way, with the hardware at our immediate disposal, to *guarantee* the fragment's vaporization . . . and anything less than total vaporization risked hitting Mars with something very like the blast of an antique shotgun. Scan the thought, for a sec, of rubble impacting all across the target hemisphere, devastating, deadly, and utterly random. The largest Martian cities . . . Mariner, Denver-Olympus, Tharsisview, Pittsburgh, Hellas, Kasei City, all would be seriously damaged, possibly destroyed. People would *die* . . . unthinkable tragedy on a scale as grand as the planet-gashing length of the Mariner Valles itself.

It was Far Thinking himself who simmed the final answer. Leave the rogue fragment alone, and it would impact Mars at a precisely knowable point . . . smack in the southern reaches of Chryse Planitia at the mouth of the Ares Vallis. No cities or habs nearby, thank Life, and the larger impact would actually accelerate what we were trying to do in the long run. The runaway fragment might advance the Plan's completion by as much as four centuries.

Historical irony, though, that impact site. The first Martian rover had bounced to a halt at Ares, not far from Wahoo Crater. And the Viking I Memorial was just eight hundred kils to the west. As it happened, though, that part of Chryse, two kils below the arbitrary sea-level datum for the planet, was already under water, submerged by a pocket-sized sea extending from Ares Vallis almost all the way to the Viking Memorial in the west, and north most of the way to Acidalia. It was currently midwinter in the northern hemisphere and the sea was frozen . . . but when the major fragment struck, our best calcs suggested that the ice would melt . . . and catastrophically so for any settlements in lowland regions further south. The wave would sweep through the chaotic terrain of Xanthe Terra and Margaritifer, plunge into the three-kil-deep basin at the far eastern end of the

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Valles Marineris . . . then sweep around to the west, entering Eos and Capri Chasmas, a lateral avalanche of high-velocity mud and water.

And once it hit the narrow confines of the valles, the water would start moving even faster. *Injection event.*

3

"The impact will occur," I told Paul, "twenty-eight hundred kilometers north-north-west from this spot. Our terraforming efforts have already resulted in a small sea in that region, though it is frozen over at this time of year. The impact will instantly vaporize some two to three thousand cubic kilometers of ice and permafrost and create a tidal wave of immense proportions in the remaining liquid water.

"That wave will sweep across the chaotic terrain between ground zero and this spot in approximately six hours. We estimate that, at that time, it will be fifty meters high and traveling at three hundred kilometers per hour."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself."

"We are. Do you doubt our calcs?"

"Eh? No. No, of course not. I know better than *that.*" An unreadable expression tugged at his features, and I decided he was reacting to his xenophobia again. The amortals had been designed to handle complex calculations and informational exchanges in ways that transcended the purely organic reach of humans, and sometimes our differences frightened them.

"Have you ever seen the Mediterranean Sea, Paul?"

He shook his head. "Grew up in North America. Place called Maine. But I know the place you're talkin' about."

"Twenty million years ago, the dam walling off the Atlantic from the low-lying Mediterranean Valley beyond crumbled and the ocean came in. That entire valley, four thousand kilometers long and thirteen hundred wide at spots, was filled in a matter of days . . . though the Gibraltar waterfall must have persisted for centuries after that.

"And we know there have been similar injection events here on Mars. When the Tharsis Bulge rose a billion years ago, it melted a small ocean of permafrost that came surging down off the new highlands. As the Valles Marineris formed, collapsing with the permafrost melt, they channeled a lot of that water east and north, with floods powerful enough to sweep along boulders the size of small buildings.

"The problem is that *this* time, unlike ancient Mars and unlike the Mediterranean Valley of the mid-Miocene, there are humans in the way. We're here to save you."

"And I'm tellin' *you,* I don't care to *be* saved!" Reaching up, he patted the gimbaled chair and control elements above his head. "I got it all covered, right here."

Zet. I wasn't linking with him. Sometimes, the mental processes of fuzzy-scuzzy saps were all but incomprehensible. All you could do was let them go their own way . . . but, Life! When that way led to suicide. . . .

"You cannot survive the coming flood, Paul," I told him.

"Mmm. D'you ever hear of Noah? And the ark?"

"I'm afraid not . . ." I shifted focus, drawing on the Marsnet data base. The answer was there, plucked from my link through my flyer to Deimos. "Ah. One of the Judeo-Christian myths. Genesis."

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"Ayuh. Just call me Noah."

He walked over to a nearby computer console and typed out an entry on the keyboard. A *keyboard!* Ancient tech, that, but the flatscreen lit up with a three-D wireframe of the upside-down Mars hut, rotating in space. Six points flashed along the base, three along each long side. "Those are my flotation bags," he said. "Salvaged 'em off old Conestoga supply pods."

"Balyuts," I offered, naming the heavy, inflatable, and detachable balloons that served as temporary heat shields for aerobraking landers. Paul must have picked some unused reserve units up at a surplus warehouse somewhere, units that were cheaper to sell for salvage than to haul back to orbit again.

"Ayuh." He typed another entry and another point of light winked, this on the smaller half-cylinder of the Mars hut's airlock. "And that there's my sea anchor," he said.

"This is to hold you in place? It is nothing but a re-entry parachute. I fear you have underestimated—"

"Shoot, Cessie, the thing won't keep me in one spot. *I* know that! The term's from sailing days, back on Earth. Used to do some sailing, you know, a long time ago, before I came here. A sea anchor's like the tail of a kite. Keeps your nose pointed forward."

"I have experience with neither sailing nor kites," I admitted. I watched as his bony fingers clattered once more across the primitive input device. Red lights flashed on around the Mars hut's perimeter. "And these?"

"Thrusters," he said. "Pulled 'em from my lobber."

I was struggling to follow his logic . . . if, indeed, there was any there to begin with. "Wait. Paul, this whole enterprise is preposterous. You really intend to *fly*. . . ?"

He clucked tongue against teeth. "Do you really take me to be that big an idiot? Hell, I'm not gonna fly when that wave hits tomorrow. I'm gonna *sail!*"

I blinked. "Sail. In a Mars hut."

"Ayuh. Should be quite a ride."

Only then did it all come together for me . . . what this human intended to attempt. At least it did explain the odd name he'd picked for his frail and unlikely craft.

"You . . . have a talent for understatement. How do you plan to steer? . . . Ah!"

"Yup. The thrusters." Reaching up high, he patted the control board attached to the gimbaled seat. It mounted two joysticks, each with pressure-sensitive throttle controls. "Got 'em out of my junked lobber. Control 'em from here, by radio. Port and starboard. I figure they'll let me steer through the worst of it, enough, mebbe, to hold to the center of the channel."

"Fuel?"

"Sixty seconds at full thrust for each. And of course I'll only be giving 'em short squirts, a second or two at a time, and at low thrust I should have three, mebbe four minutes on each, total. It'll get me by."

I was speechless for a moment, though whether from disbelief or sheer admiration for his cleverness, even I wasn't certain. "If you run out of fuel, you'll be helpless."

He shrugged. "I just need enough for the rough parts." He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, toward the airlock. "My sea anchor'll keep me headed straight, and I got external cams t'see where I'm goin'. Shouldn't

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need much steering at all, really, 'cept in the real tight passes. If I line m'self up right, I should make it through okay."

"You plan to ride a tidal wave all the way up the Marineris Valley? How far?"

He shrugged, bony shoulders heaving beneath the drape of his undersuit padding. "Th' Valles run about three thousand kilometers all told." He grinned. "Not quite as bad as the Med Valley, of course, but long enough. The ground rises pretty sharp at the Noctis Labyrinthus, as it starts climbin' the Tharsis Bulge. I reckon I'll come t'ground somewheres close t'Pittsburgh."

"Unless you smash head-on into a cliff or a mensa along the way. Or this pressurized can of yours springs a leak. Or the shockwave itself kills you. Or—"

He gave me a wily grin. "Y'think I'm crazy, don'tcha?

"When I first came here," I told him gently, "I thought, just possibly, that you were. It is clear to me now that you know what you're doing. I still consider this attempt of yours misguided and for no rational purpose. But you are not crazy."

"That's good to hear," he said. "Sometimes . . . I wonder." He blinked, shaking his head. "You *could* force me, y'know. At my age, I couldn't put up much of a fight. Knock me out, drag me off to your paradise in space."

"And *prove* what many of you have been saying about us all this time? That we do not respect the rights or beliefs of your cultures, that we have our own long-term agenda, one that does not include *sapiens*. No. That would serve no one well, neither your people nor ours. Besides, we *do* respect your species's right to determine its own future."

"Sure. Whatever you say, Cessie."

I could tell from his expression that he didn't believe me. I wondered if there'd been a time when *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalis* had regarded one another with this same faintly bemused lack of mutual comprehension.

How long would *Homo sapiens* survive, even with our care and maintenance? Extinction is inevitable for all species. Some, though, seem by their actions to embrace extinction with the fervor one has for a long-parted lover.

"And I can't convince you to come with me?"

"Nope. Got it all covered."

I thought of fossils, remnants of long-dead life, of species that had flowered once, joined Life's dance, then vanished, leaving nothing behind but traces in rock and ice.

"And . . . if you survive. What will you do then?"

"Find a new place t'stake a claim and set up shop, of course. Started out in Pittsburgh when I first got off the cycler. Probably try the same again. Reckon I can keep prospecting, wherever I end up. Like I say, we're just starting t'learn about this world. I imagine Mars'll be providing us with surprises for a good long time to come, even after you people mess it up." He winked. "And I aim to experience some of 'em."

I sighed. "I don't understand *Sapiens*," I said. "I don't understand *you*."

"That makes two of us, Cessie. But it's the way I want it, y'know?"

"Will you leave a data feed open? Or better, take a Companion."

He made a face at that, but I ignored it. Holding out my hand, I directed an inward thought through my implants, and a golden sphere began grow-

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ing in the palm of my hand. In seconds, the sphere was ten centimeters across, assembled from the nanocells within my body.

"It will adapt itself to your communications and monitor circuitry," I told him, "and allow us to follow you from orbit. If you're stranded—"

"Never did like them things. . . ."

"Nanotechnology is no different from any other technology, Paul. And no more magical than computers would have seemed to Leonardo da Vinci."

"Leonardo didn't have amortal know-it-alls fumbling icebergs on planetary approach." His eyes narrowed. "How come you people didn't just nanotech the place, 'stead of dropping rocks on it?"

"Because," I replied patiently, "nanotech is not magic. The program matrices for medical nano and Companion technology are well understood and easily controlled. A planet is an extremely large and variable venue for nanoscale replication, and—"

"All right, all right. Don't go all techie on me."

"As you wish." I didn't add that there'd been considerable debate among the amortals. Many had counseled waiting on Project Eos until our control of nanotech allowed reworking an entire world to spec.

But I didn't think Paul would understand.

"Okay," he said, nodding thoughtfully. "I can see how one of them Companion thingies'd be a good idea. A damned good idea, in fact. The one thing I'm not certain about here, y'see, is what happens if I pile into the rocks somewhere so far from civilization that no one knew where I was."

"Take a Companion, and we will be riding with you. We will know exactly where you are, and what is happening."

"Yeah . . . but does that mean I have to have it, uh, inside me?"

I imitated a human shrug. "Not if you do not wish it. It will attach itself to the circuitry of your computer, your cameras, your communications suite."

"Well, I guess that's okay, then."

"We will be following your progress with considerable interest. Since it will be uplinked through Marsnet, anyone with net access will be able to watch as well."

"Never did care for a big audience. Ah, well. I can live with that, I guess. Go ahead. Let the thing loose, or whatever you do."

A further command programmed the golden sphere, which dissolved into a sparkling cloud, then wafted across the compartment to vanish into the Mars hut's main computer console. Paul stepped aside to let it pass, giving it a glare that told me he did not, *could* not trust such magical-seeming technologies.

"This will improve your chances for survival," I told him.

"Sometimes," he replied in that painfully slow speech of his, "I think you amorts worry too much about life, and not enough about *living*. But then, I reckon immortality makes you folks take a cautious slant on everything y'do, eh?"

"Life is not something to be wasted."

"It's also something to be *enjoyed*. I want this, Cessair. I plan to enjoy every damned minute of it. Heh! A free ride, clear back t'Pittsburgh, Mars!"

"There are safer ways of making that passage," I told him.

"Mebbe. But none that'll be this much *fun!*" He turned and looked up into the glassy eye of a camera, mounted on what once had been the Mars hut's floor. "Hey, girls! See ya on the Marsnet!"

I do not understand *sapiens*.

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4

I had more business to conduct in Pittsburgh and Denver-Olympus. By the time I floatered back to Deimos and joined Andr, Dahlen, and the rest of the amortals on the Eos Team in Ops, Impact was minutes away. A last scan from orbit of Norris's site—using infrared, since it was dark by then—showed his preparations, as near as we could tell, complete. Two major changes outside. He'd brought the cryoboxes inside, though I frankly didn't know where else inside the hut he'd had room to store them.

And one thing more. There now was a deep, rectangular trench where his wife had been buried, and the cross-shaped marker had been removed. We assumed at the time he wanted to rebury her somewhere else, on higher ground.

Impact. . . .

We were watching on the big screen inside Deimos Ops when a spark burst into incandescent brilliance above the Martian night. Sliding swiftly across the dark hemisphere, it grew bright enough to illuminate the ground beneath as it crossed the frozen waters covering Chryse, then strobed in a dazzling, silent pulse.

We all watched then, as minutes dragged by. The big AIs, of course, were recording everything; the data from this impact would provide a wealth of insight into cometary impact dynamics, and their interactions with planetary atmospheres and surfaces. That left us free to . . . watch. Even after the initial flash died away, the impact site, just across the dawn terminator, continued to glow in infrared, giving a ghostly glow to a fuzzy disk spreading across the Martian surface. From satellites in low orbit, the shockwave appeared two-dimensional, hugging the landscape as it climbed the gentle slopes of Xanthe Terra, submerging the broken and chaotic terrain in a milky cloud that turned gold when the first light of the sun touched it.

"Time for link in," Andr chirped at me. I'd slowed my clockspeed again; data flow and conversation snapped and snickered around me, too fast, now, for my slowed senses to comprehend. *Is this how we appear to them*?

"Right," I drawled. A linkpod was already prepared. I snuggled down into its embrace, extruding the necessary connections and linklocks. Static crackled behind my eyes. . . .

And then I was staring up through a grime-smeared plastic visor at what once had been the Mars hut's floor. I could hear the *whiss-thunk-hiss* of his breather unit and the quiet ticking of his PLSS, could feel the bite of the aging pressure suit's fittings and the heavy straps securing me to the gimbaled seat.

Worse, I *hurt* . . . with a dull and nagging ache in my joints, my back, my hands. At first, I thought he was sore from the physical work he'd been doing, but a quick taste of a side-channel medband convinced me I was feeling his arthritis.

Arthritis! In this day and age? Didn't he know that a microgram or so of medical nano *could* . . .

Humans. So short-sighted. So suspicious. So stubborn. I wondered what else might be wrong with that pain-soaked body.

I suppose, technically, we were violating his rights under the Tycho Charter, since he'd expressly requested that we not invade his body with the Companion's nano . . . but the whole point of this exercise was to find out

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what Paul Norris was *really* thinking, why he was taking this awful gamble with existence. The nano had already been programmed to enter not only his equipment, but his body . . . as an invisible mist of molecule-sized units drawn into him with each breath and filtering through his skin. Once in his circulatory system, it had taken perhaps ten minutes for several grams of nano to assemble itself into receptors, processors, and routers at key points in his brain, all linked to the outside by a tiny radio transmitter riding safely within the cavern of one of his frontal sinuses.

It was for his own good. We amortals take seriously our pledge to help our genetic and technological forebears. Besides, he was only a human, his rights outweighed by what we would learn.

I couldn't read his mind directly, of course. Wetware circuitry, neural pathways, memory patterns, and response triggers all vary tremendously from human to human, and there'd been no time to record Paul Norris's patterns, much less win his cooperation. But I was receiving a full sensory download, experiencing what he experienced as he experienced it, and my impressions were being recorded for later study.

They were also available on the Net, for anyone who cared to tap in. Over fifteen thousand amortals had already linked in from Marsnet, and more were coming online every second, from Solarnet and even Earthnet, where more and more humans were logging on.

I remembered what Paul had said about large audiences, and smiled to myself. He had *no* idea . . .

There wasn't much to sense at first, save the discomfort. It took almost three hours for the shockwave to make it to Paul's domie, and by that time, Eos Chasma was across the morning terminator, though the bottom of the canyon was still shrouded in morning shadow and ground fog. Eos Ops relayed updates to Paul by conventional com every few minutes; the cameras mounted on the outside of his Mars hut showed little but the swiftly illuminating sky framed by towering black cliffs.

"You've got ten seconds," Andr's voice reported, speaking in Paul's ear.

Paul's focus shifted from the big wall monitor to the computer display mounted across his lap, where seconds were ticking off and a systems check was drawing to a close. "I see it," Paul replied. He appeared calm, though I could hear rising stress in his voice. Sweat tickled my own face as it beaded above his eyes and trickled down nose and cheeks. "S'funny, y'know, knowin' that the rock hit hours ago and not feelin' a—"

The jolt was like a savage kick in the tail, and the container-packed compartment whirled wildly around my head as the gimbaled seat swung freely. My view went dark, too, as the lights failed, and I cursed the OS-strain's lack of IR vision.

Computers were still on line, filling the compartment with a cool glow. In another moment, the reserve-lighting came up. I felt an unpleasant trembling through every bone in my body, and my view through Paul's eyes was jittering hard, worse than the vibrations of aerobrake re-entry.

Paul looked around the compartment, checking each of the stacked and strapped-down hardfoam crates, cryocases, and storage containers. He must be worried about the delicate fossils stored inside, especially the ice fossils, the way he kept looking at the cryocases. I wanted to tell him to relax, that the way he'd secured them they would ride out the shocks, no problem, but I decided that he wouldn't appreciate knowing just how close at his shoulder I was.

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I did wish he would spend less time checking his cases and readouts, and more looking up at the big screen, affixed to his ceiling—the Mars hut's floor—with massive bolts and polyplas braces.

The thunderclap of that first shockwave had faded but not died completely. The raw, rumbling noise was growing louder again, and at last Paul looked up at the main screen . . . and stared into an awful glory.

The gold-pink of the Martian dawn sky was gone, masked by a fast-spreading blanket of ocher-brown and black sweeping down the valles from the northeast. I could see the distant cliffs vanishing into that cloud one by one as it drew closer, and the thunder increased with the approach. The robexcavator, visible on the left side of the screen, was trembling . . . the thickly strewn rocks on the ground were vibrating as tiny sand dunes gradually collapsed and flattened. The sound was something I . . . something we could feel in our bones as the second wave approached.

I was watching for the onrushing wall of water. I didn't see it before the screen, and then vision itself, went black.

I felt again the cool embrace of the linkpod. All sensory input had ceased, and for a gut-twisting moment of disorientation and fear, I thought, I *knew* that Paul had been killed. Then the side-channel telemetry filtered through my blinkered awareness, recording his heartbeat, his breathing, his brain's electrical activity.

"Neg scan on the satfeed," Andr chirped in a high-speed transfer. I lost part of his feed input . . . but gathered that the tidal wave that had just swept over Paul Norris's camp had been seventy meters high, and that he couldn't see the Mars hut on any of the satellite views. "Did he scrag?"

"Neg," I said on the Ops channel. "Vitals okay. I think he's unconscious."

"There!" Dahlen said, pointing at another monitor. "Balyuts deployed!"

The monitor she was indicating showed the Martian surface at an oblique angle, one just peering in past the towering, red and ocher-banded cliffs of Eos Chasma's south wall. The bottom of that valley was now lost in a surging, whirling mass of, not water, but mud . . . thick and red and viscous but still churning and frothing like whitewater rapids. The Mars hut, very tiny and very, very alone, had just bobbed into view riding on the surface, five of its six balyuts air-filled and taut, supporting the hut's foundation slab like pallbearers lugging a rich *Sapiens*'s coffin. There was no sign of the sixth balloon. Perhaps it had not deployed, or possibly the violence of the tidal wave's arrival had shredded its tough fabric.

No matter. Paul, obviously, understood redundant engineering. His vessel bumped and shuddered along now on the foaming waves with only a ten-degree list to the right . . . what Paul would have called "starboard" in his sailing days on Earth. I felt his sensory link returning, and submerged myself again in his awareness.

His . . . *our* heads hurt, a dull throb, and we tasted the salty bite of blood. Our eyes weren't focusing well—I couldn't read the lap display, but when he looked up at the big screen, I saw the mudflow from the point of view of a piece of flotsam racing along with the current, through eyes scant centimeters above the roiling muck. Cliff tops, their golden caprocks shrouded now in boiling storm clouds kilometers above my head, raced past, while the mud-thick water, despite its churning and foaming, seemed static around me. The scene jittered and trembled, occasionally jolting hard, as though someone had slammed against the camera, and at those times my world-view would pitch and yaw wildly as Paul's gimbaled chair absorbed the

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shock. I could hear him shouting something into the din, felt the rasp in my throat and the movements of my jaw . . . but I couldn't make out the words above the keening, savage thunder engulfing his frail habitat.

Injection event . . .

Was it my imagination, or were we moving faster now? The cliffs on our left hand were blurring as they raced past, and I felt myself instinctively trying to edge to the right, trying to stay clear. Paul's thumb depressed a button on the joystick he held in a trembling right hand, and I felt a hard bump in my spine and gut as the chemical thrusters nudged us away from that hurtling, deadly wall.

Minutes passed with the banded rock walls. The thunder dimmed, somewhat, though we could still hear a thrumming, keening roar of Armageddaic proportions, howling just beyond the thin steel and durplast shell.

"You amorts watchin', up there?" Paul shouted as thunder screamed and boomed. "You see? This is what it means to be *alive!*" Then he twisted his helmeted head back and vented a long, shrill ya-*hoooo* that rang from walls already ringing with the chaos outside.

Indeed, my own heart rate was up, in sympathy with Paul's. There was no physiological danger in the link for me, of course, not with full buffers and safety cutouts; I would never have consented to a Life-risking link. I've heard of a handful of amortals who risk everything in a too-close link with a human facing extinction, and could never imagine why.

I *knew* why, now. Until this moment, I had existed for 193 stadyers in a sterile, muffled cocoon; it was all I could do not to shout myself from the sheer, heart-leaping emotion of the instant.

Others must have agreed. A side-channel told me there were now 21,867 amortals linked in with this experience, almost half of all of the amortals in existence, together with an unknown number of AIs. More than that, humans were logging on as well in unprecedented numbers, from Mars, from Luna and the microworlds, from Earth herself. The total now was over 12.8 million—a number that continued rising rapidly from moment to moment as word of Paul Norris's voyage spread.

The water's speed had increased in the narrow confines of Coprates Chasma, a one-thousand-kilometer straight-line channel far grander and more spectacular than anything Percival Lowell could have imagined. At four hundred kilometers per hour, the passage took two and a half hours, but this was the easy part, a straight, steady rush requiring only occasional bumps from the thrusters to keep the Ark in the center of the stream. There was worse, *much* worse, to come.

"How *'bout* that, Ann?" Paul's voice sounded in our ears, audible now as the thunder continued to fade. "Y'ever think we'd see this? Last time water flowed in these canyons was a billion years ago, as Tharsis bulged and the permafrost melted, and here we are riding it, by damn! Dear, sweet Christ, it's good to share this with you. . . ."

I wondered if the experience had accelerated his dementia. His wife's corpse, I knew, must be stored somewhere inside the hut in a lovingly secured cryocase coffin. He was talking to her again.

"Y'see the expression on that amort's face, when I told her off? Heh. They want it all so skekkin' neat and orderly! No room for clutter. No room for improvisin' the unexpected. Hell, no room in the preservin' of life for *enjoyin'* it!" Our seat fell away suddenly as the Mars hut went into a sudden drop, following the surge as it spilled into a lower-lying stretch of the chasma. My

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stomach twisted hard and I almost screamed. "Hah!" Paul shouted, exultant. "Cessie, *that* one's fer you!"

Spray and spume exploded across the clumsy craft's bow, momentarily obliterating the view ahead in myriad droplets clinging to the camera lens. The lens was probably bonded with a frictionless coating, or the mud and grit splashing over it would have completely obscured our vision.

Three hours after the wave had first thundered across Paul's Mars hut, the unlikely lifeboat was swept out of the Coprates Channel, at that point only 150 kilometers wide, following the wave as it surged out into the far broader basin of the Mela Chasma. The sky was very dark, now, and there was a steady drumming on the slab surface of the hut. Rain. The first rain to fall on Mars in . . . what? A billion years? Two?

"Got a choice here," he called. His voice sounded weaker . . . tired, we suspected. "Keep headin' west, or I could try swingin' north, head for Candor and Ophir. But the terrain's pretty broken up there. Lots of mensae, lots of mountain tops for me to smack into. An' I'm still movin' at a pretty fair clip." He cocked his head to one side. "Don't much like the squeaks and hisses I'm hearing in here. Not sure I'm still watertight."

I could hear it too, above the deeper booming of the water outside. The creakings might have been the packing cases shifting against their constraints, but there was also a shrill, high whistle that could only be escaping air. These old Mars huts had a self-sealer sandwiched between the thin, double shells, but that would work only for a small puncture. If a seam in the hull opened . . . or both of the airtight seals at the airlock, the interior was going to start losing air. After fifty-one stadyers of terraforming, air pressure on Mars still ran at only a hundredth of a bar. Worse, if the compartment began flooding, the Mars hut would sink in water that might be as much as a kilometer deep. We had no equipment capable of finding and recovering so tiny an artifact, certainly not in the time his pressure suit would grant him.

How much of an air supply did he have, anyway? He hadn't checked his suit systems or PLSS readouts, so I couldn't tell. Zet! Wasn't the human interested in his own life-support capabilities?

"Listen, Paul," Andr's voice said in our ear, speaking over his helmet's com circuit. He'd obviously lowered his own clock speed for the attempt, but his voice still sounded strangely high-pitched and chirpy, with the ragged fringes caused by unrealized sidebands. "We're monitoring the wave front from the impact. It's already climbed the Juvantae Dorsa and started spilling into Ophir Chasma. The whole region is masked by steam and spray. If you head that way, well, your ride's going to get pretty rough."

"Yup." Paul didn't sound worried. "'Fraid a' that. Tryin' to picture a waterfall four kilometers high, 'cause that's how high the cliffs are at the north rim of Ophir." He shook his head inside his helmet. "I'd get swept into a cliff for sure. West it is, then. Used to prospect in Ius Chasma, way back when. Found our very first Martian fossil there, in fact. Remember that, Ann? So beautiful. So *perfect*. . . ."

I suppressed a cold shudder at that. At times, Paul seemed almost rational. At others . . .

I remembered studying meter-resolution holos of the Valles. Technically, there were two narrow canyons running west out of the Mela Chasma, Tithonium in the north and Ius in the south, but the east end of Tithonium wasn't much more than a chain of craters, broken ground and sinkholes at

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the caprock level, a dead end as far as the Ark's voyage was concerned. Ius Chasma was long—another thousand kilometers—and gently curving, but it was deeper and narrower than the Coprates Chasma he'd already traversed, and the western end tilted up, toward the fossae-riddled highlands of the Noctis Labyrinthus.

"Here are the figures," Andr's voice went on. I saw them when Paul glanced down at the laptop console screen, block upon block of differential equations dealing with fluid dynamics, pressure and gravity, and the far subtler workings of chaos. They proved what I'd already feared. The surge we rode had slowed as it entered the broad expanse of Melas Chasma, and the Ark was now bobbing along at a relatively sedate eighty kilometers an hour . . . but when the waters cascading now into Ophir Chasma to the north came sweeping down, Paul's speed was going to increase again. In effect, he would be riding a second injection event, one that would squirt him down the long curve of Ius like a wet pip squeeze-popped from between thumb and finger.

And at the end . . . well, the land rose sharply, where the Valles Marineris had their birth within the tangled and thickly channeled ground of the Noctis Labyrinthus. The city of Pittsburgh was located high up in the Labyrinth; a thousand kils beyond were the three Tharsis Montes, Arsia, Pavonis, and Ascraeus, the ancient, three-in-a-row volcanic attendants of great Olympus Mons himself.

The question was how far the wave would travel up the Tharsis Bulge. Our calculations suggested that it would not get as far as Pittsburgh . . . but just to make sure, most of the population had evacuated to Denver-Olympus, twenty-five hundred kilometers further to the northwest.

Somewhere on that thousand-kilometer slope of broken, chaotic terrain, the Ark would come to rest. But where? And . . . how gently?

For a time, the voyage was almost idyllic, but Paul continued handling the thruster controls, judiciously nudging us across the rising flood toward the west, where the broad, wide basin of Melas gradually constricted like a funnel, until the walls of the canyon were less than eighty kils apart.

I could feel our speed increasing again, could feel the rising shudder of the battered Mars hut's shell, the thrum of hammering currents, the hiss of bleeding air. I pulled back from my link enough to check the log-on numbers. Over half of all amortals—24,925 in all—were following Paul's ride; the human log-on numbers were nothing less than phenomenal . . . two billion and some, the number flickering higher with each second!

What were they watching for? The vicarious sense of danger and probable disaster? Or did they identify, somehow, with the ancient Paul Norris?

"Fossils," Paul muttered . . . to Andr, to himself, to Ann, I couldn't tell. "I 'spose we're as out of date as an old spine-wheel, eh? But if the fossils tell us anything, it's that life *adapts,* or it goes under. Y'get too set in your ways, y'get to dependin' too much on your neighbors, and the next thing y'know, the ocean's gone and you're dyin' in a place you were never meant t'imagine."

Lightning flared, igniting the bellies of black-ocher clouds billowing above the chasma and briefly turning the cliff-tops white. Dust clouds and water droplets could carry a tremendous static charge. Rock walls blurred once more, as savage currents tore and slashed at the wildly bobbing bit of steel and durplast flotsam. One of Paul's monitors showed a view from an orbiter, a vast and angry, counterclockwise spiral of lightning-strobing clouds embracing a quarter of Mars's western hemisphere. It was catas-

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trophism on a planetary scale, something unseen in the Solar System since the Chicxulub impact that ended the dinosaurs and their age sixty-five million years ago.

And on the fringe of that fire-shot hurricane was one ancient OS human, in his frail and makeshift ark.

Noah. I'd downloaded more of the myth before linking in. Was this Martian Noah preserving samples of ancient Martian life unknown to us? Unlikely. But he might well be preserving something more . . . the spirit of a species long dormant and in the twilight of its span. Everyone knew that *H. amortalis* would replace the saps, that there was really no point in their continued existence beyond what they, themselves, found for themselves.

Almost three billion humans were logged on now, watching, feeling. An astonishing awareness.

I found myself pleading with Life to spare his life. Zet. Irrational, I know, but I was now facing powers that far surpassed the skills and grasp of the Amortals, even though it had been we who'd released them.

More, I was facing an aspect of Humankind that my species had forgotten.

"Pickin' up a real bit of speed, now," Paul's voice said. "Lot of vibration here. I'm well into the Ius Chasma's eastern mouth, and the tide surge's squirtin' me along at a pretty good clip."

He was fading. I could feel that, feel the tremors of exhaustion dragging at his arms, his back. I felt something else, too, which alarmed me more. We were having trouble breathing, each breath a hard drag against an increasing pressure over our chest. Paul checked his airflow and PLSS readouts then, but everything showed normal. He bumped up the O_2 valve a notch and went back to steering. The Ius Chasma here was neatly divided by a long, knife-backed ridge called the Geryon Montes, narrowing the canyon to five kilometers in places, maybe less. Zet. He should have tried for the main passage to the north. Maybe he'd gotten confused . . . maybe he'd simply not been able to correct the awkward ship's course enough to clear the montes and put it on our left.

Judging from the cliffs flashing past to either side now, the water beneath was perhaps half a kil deep; the air around us had a peculiar, hazy softness to it, the effect of dust and water droplets hurled up by the water's explosive passage. The cliffs, what I could see of them, showed evidence of the sheer violence of the water's arrival. Martian regolith is laden with peroxides that can react explosively with water, releasing vast quantities of oxygen.

Not enough to breathe, of course. Not even enough to ignite with the hydrogen and methane that must be outgassing from the rocks and melting ices as well. But enough to give the air a strange and beautiful glow as the cloud cover began to grow ragged and the first shafts of sunlight angled down out of the sky, sparkling against the water. The rain continued, but lightly . . . a thin mist gleaming in the golden light.

"My God," Paul said. "Ann . . . it's *beautiful* . . ."

The jolt as we collided with the rock wall to our right was sharp and savage enough to leave my head spinning. I felt the compartment tip alarmingly; another balyut, again on the right side, had blown, cushioning the impact but leaving us with a dangerous list to starboard.

Paul's heart was thudding in his chest now, and he was struggling with each breath. I willed him to up the O_2 again, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Should be okay," he said. "Should be okay. We should stay afloat even if

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we lose three of the things." Then we struck the wall again, rebounding with a dizzying spin that left me breathing as hard as Paul. Geryon Montes was behind us now; ahead, just visible through flashing spray, a purple shadow loomed high and rounded.

The waveride was coming to an end.

"Paul!" Andr's voice was calling. "Paul, respond, please!"

I could hear the voice plainly, but Paul was not reacting.

"Feel like we're comin' home at last, eh, Ann? Not just Pittsburgh, Mars. But Earth. Been a long time since we've seen rain like that. Or water, come t'that."

"Paul! Please respond!"

"Eh. Don't tell them Amortals I said so. This might be a pretty nice place t'live, some year. Our grandkids might live here, if'n the girls decide to come back, someday. Christ, I miss 'em. But life's gotta reach out. Fill new niches. Expand. Adapt. Fossils. . . ."

It felt as though we were enduring high acceleration, a smothering, crushing sensation over our chest. A sharp pain was drilling its way down my left arm.

A side channel fed me new data on Paul's condition. Heart attack! Life, didn't he even have preventative nano for. . . ?

No. Of course he didn't. Nothing to keep the arthritis in check, nothing to keep the coronary artery clear. Years of self-neglect, of refusal to try the new ways, and he was dying now, as I watched.

What could I do? The nano I'd slipped into his system only functioned within certain narrow parameters. It let me communicate with him but could not be reprogrammed for a medical application.

Swiftly, though, I uploaded new instructions, directing the radio transmitter to extrude parts of itself, forming new connections, following facial blood vessels to plate out bits of itself against the angle of his jaw bone.

"Paul!" I shouted, and the bone-conductor speaker must have jolted him.

"Eh? Whozat?"

"Paul, this is Cessair! Increase your oxyflow! Now!"

"What the hell are you doin' in my head, woman?"

"I'm sorry. I'll explain later. Right now . . . we've got to get you to a doctor, do you understand?"

He chuckled. "Don'tcha think I oughta land, first?" But he keyed his air mix to pure O_2 at hyperbaric pressure. The crushing feeling abated, slightly, but I felt him panting with the strain.

He was staring into the screen, where the purple mountain rose from the water. The slope didn't look too bad—it wasn't a sheer cliff, at any rate—but if he dashed into it nose first . . .

"Paul! Use your thrusters! You've lost two balyuts on your starboard side, and you're dragging some there. If you can turn right, turn broadside with your port side to the mountain, your left-side balyuts ought to cushion your impact a bit!"

"Do you see it?" he asked. "Ann . . . do you see it?"

He was staring into the big screen. With the craft's stern dragging low in the water, the camera was angled high now, focused on the misty grays and silvers and golds of the cloud cover above the Noctis Labyrinthus. And there, just visible in the uncertain light, I could see a faint smear of Life-pure colors . . . red, green, yellow . . . and blue.

I'd never seen anything like that.

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"A rainbow . . ." Paul said. His voice was blurred with the effort. "Ann, it's a *rainbow,* the first on Mars in a billion years. . . ."

And then I was lying on the linkpod's cushions, cut off from the tiny bit of flotsam below and feeling very much alone.

5

The wave was gentle by the time it crested the end of Ius Chasma and crawled up the lower slopes of the Tharsis Bulge. He came to rest less than a hundred kils from Pittsburgh, the Martian city where he'd started off, with his beloved Ann, so many years ago. Five billion humans experienced the Marineris Ride, either directly or through sensory replays later on—a quarter of the old human race. I wonder, sometimes, if that was when the renaissance began.

Homo amortalis was supposed to be Man's successor, an elegant and seamless melding of machine and reworked human genes. By losing any allegiance to a set shape or somatype, it was we who would inherit a galaxy far too vast and hostile for *Homo sapiens,* with his genetic structure cast and honed in the forge of Earth's limited environment. Until he entered space, man's greatest claim to survival had always been his adaptability, and we amortals had taken adaptability—even in the forms our bodies take—to unprecedented levels. It was we who would inherit the stars, not *Homo sapiens.*

Was that, I wonder now, entirely true? Since Paul's Marineris ride, our evacuation efforts on Mars have met with almost universal failure . . . and thousands of OS humans who'd already emigrated to the microworld refuges have returned. Injection events. Marsquakes. Storms. Mudslides. They face them. They die in unprecedented numbers.

And the survivors keep going.

Paul was buried next to Ann in the shadow of the monument they raised to him and his epic ride, close by the sparkling, ocher shores of the new Marineris Sea. They found a handwritten will sealed in one of the containers, Paul's insurance in case he didn't survive the trip. From its tone, it sounded as though he half-expected to end up entombed within the Mars hut beneath a few hundred meters of mud at the bottom of the Valles Marineris. Ann's body, perfectly preserved by the cold, dry Martian environment, was sealed in a cryocase strapped in next to the seat where we found Paul's body.

This is my home, the letter explained. *I'm not leaving it for anything, not for a new world, not for a better world. I'll build my own life, here with Ann. Forever.*

More than anything else, he wanted to be buried with Ann.

I did some checking in the Records Center in Pittsburgh. Paul Norris and Ann Whittaker both contributed genetic material shortly after their arrival on Mars, material purchased by the Amortal Program. Some of my more recent somatypes include DNA sequences contributed by those two, a reminder that we amortals are Mankind's children.

I find myself proud to have such parents. Even if their stubbornness borders on the incomprehensible at times.

The amortals were designed to be supremely adaptable. Perhaps, though, survival requires a bit of stubbornness as well.

Perhaps Paul's species will outlive us after all. O

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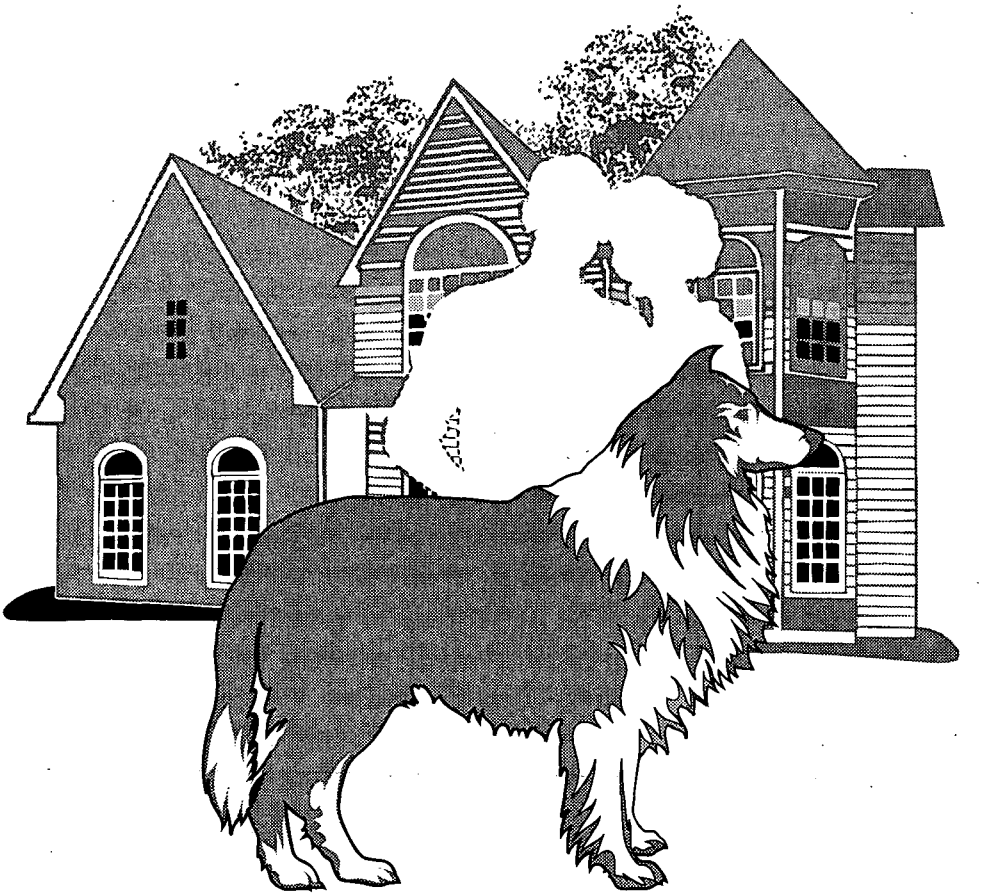
Valerie J. Freireich

Valerie J. Freireich looks at a slice of everyday life from an unusual viewpoint in her bittersweet examination of . . .

SUBURBAN ECOLOGY



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I stretch, then stare, waiting. If she would open a door, if I were outside, matters would be different, but her bland palace, her extravagant den of comfortable monotony, has luxury but few pleasures. I cock my head invitingly. She does nothing. I walk away.

The television absorbs her attention; the window mine. Beyond the obvious similarities—the glass barrier, the limited and illusive depiction of the world—I believe my display is superior. Actual interaction with the outdoors is eventually possible, while she can never enter the televised life.

The stupidity. The waste of time. Tedium is the worst pain. Well, not really—but exaggeration is one of the few excesses my life permits, albeit my censure verges on cliché. Indulge me. I am merely a dog.

Please pretend surprise. My vocabulary alone should secure your consternation. How did I acquire it? I have no answer, although I do speculate sometimes.

This is not one of them. She has turned off the television. The keys rattle as she lifts them from her purse. I run jubilantly to her, hoping for a walk, a long one, or better still, a ride. "Not now, boy," she says.

Of course I ignore her, pretending not to understand. It has worked before.

"No," she says firmly. I whine. She squats down so that we are eye to eye.

Even as I admire the egalitarian attitude with which she eliminates her superior altitude, I yearn to speak—that is, other than to bark. I notice my tail slapping annoyingly against the door frame but cannot stop it. I lick her face.

She tastes of sweetness, salty sweat, and of Chanel. Her lips hint at chocolate. I smelled chocolates earlier, on the kitchen counter. I would like to eat one. I could reach them. I won't, however.

She rubs her fingers through the hair along my back. There is, let me emphasize, nothing erotic about the gesture, yet my enjoyment is intense. I love her. I don't want her to leave.

Severely frustrated, I watch as she gets ready to go, despite my protests.

From my position near the floor, she stands immensely tall. I am just slightly higher than her knees. I glance about, a bit wildly, and glimpse myself in the hallway mirror. For an instant, I fail to recognize myself, and see a dog of no particular breed, a brown-and-white mutt. I can't recall who it is that I should otherwise have seen. Who else am I? The question startles me into immobility.

She understands it as resignation. "Good boy," she says, patting my head and scratching her nails behind my ears one final time. She leaves.

It's time to speculate. I walk to the window and watch her white car back down the driveway. I try to remember back to a more limited concept of such things, to when a car was a noisy, fast-moving danger that appeared and disappeared from my thoughts simultaneously with its appearance and disappearance from my sight. I can't. I seem always to have grasped the internal combustion engine. How did this happen? I favor the frog prince theory: I am a man under a hideous spell, although, truthfully, I remember nothing of a previous life.

Once she is out of sight, I return to the mirror and study myself. I sniff my genitals: debonair, I decide.

Trapped in the house, I await her return and doze. When I awaken, she has returned, but not alone. I've seen this one before. He smells of hair mousse and mouthwash. He keeps cats. I smell the nasty things on his trousers.

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"Off!" she shouts when I attempt to indicate my disgust with him.

"No. No. It's okay," the boor says as he tries to pet the top of my head—as though I would allow it—but, as she glances aside, he stabs his knee into my exposed belly. I collapse onto all fours, softly growling.

"He just needs to go out," my rival says.

The man has cunning. It's true that my bladder needs relief.

"You know, he'd be much easier to handle if you had him neutered."

The mere thought makes me whine.

"You're probably right," she says, placating him while petting me.

"Here, I'll let him out." Before she can object, he has opened the door.

This is the front door, not the one to the fenced back yard. This is the one of which I dream, the way to the great freedom! I'm through it and gone before any of us can change our minds. In the distance, I hear her shout at him and at me, but I also hear his false reassurance. "He'll be fine." I am on my own.

I leave her lawn in three long leaps; I cross the street in one extended bound. No cars are nearby, so I turn and follow the street in the same direction in which we take our all-too-infrequent, much-too-brief walks.

The stop sign holds the scent of the retriever from two blocks away; I add mine. It feels good, but I am quick just in case, despite his protests, she has come outside. I dash off in the direction of the vacant lot.

I slip between the tall grass easily, streamlined from nose to tail as though designed precisely for this purpose. Design is another theory, but again, this is not the moment for hypothesizing. I quickly find and follow a trail much used by the neighborhood's stray, a cousin creature.

I have wondered: Am I unique? Despite my fairy tale pretensions, I hope not. To be unique would be an affliction. I would be either an accident or an escapee from an experimental lab. I would be alone, isolated from other dogs by a super-canine mind. Me, mankind's omnipresent best friend, so much more understanding than the rest. Much better if we *all* can think and humans just don't *know* it. Although, how sad!

So I follow the recent trail of a male, mature, and healthy dog. A threat, my instincts tell me. Without volition, my hackles rise the moment I spot him, a black-and-white mutt I've seen from my window. He faces me, teeth bared in a wide, unfriendly grin. His tail is up, his legs are spread. He is ready to fight me, but perhaps he'll flee if I frighten him enough.

I stop. I stare. I slowly come forward. He watches. I am trying to think, despite the spontaneous pattern into which I have fallen. I cannot speak. I understand the concept of literacy, but I have no hands, nor pen and paper, even if I knew how to read and write. Drawn by insentient will, I try to circle him, but, wise to my ways since they are his own, he turns. We dance a mechanical dance while I and perhaps both of us try to think a way out of the trap instinct and biology have made.

With a supreme act of will, I stop. Mathematics, they say in the rhetorical wisdom, is universal. I decide to count. I have no fingers. I have no arithmetic vernacular. I paw the ground. One. Pause. One. Two. Pause.

One. Two. Three. Pause. Wait. Your turn. I move backward, out of his way.

He sniffs the area my paw has scratched, as though mine was a post-defecation behavior designed to impress him. I scratch the ground four times. Four! You moron. Count! He lifts his leg. He pees on the scuffed soil. So much for math. He walks away, pretending nonchalance. Damn. Doesn't he

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care? We are social animals. Socialize with me! I begin to follow. He stops, turns and growls. I jump back. He sniffs the air. He leaves. I watch him go.

There is also the Hell theory. I may have been sentenced to this demeaning existence by the Omnipotent, whoever He is. The less said of that possibility the better.

I skulk the neighborhood, setting off intruder-alert barking. Useless beasts. Yet I've often done the same. How does consciousness make me different from them?

Eventually, I go home. She is waiting, door propped open. My rival is gone. She is sitting on the sofa, but the television is off. Her shoes are on the floor. I sniff them in passing, perceive her evening stop at a public toilet and the mellow leather of her dear, sweat-encrusted loafers.

She opens her arms. I stand before her. She pats the sofa. In one nimble jump, I am beside her, my head resting on her thigh.

She scratches behind my ears. She sighs. I close my eyes. She kisses my head. After the kiss, I am still a dog. O

The Future of War — July 13 @ 9:00 p.m. EST
Joe Haldeman and Walter Jon Williams

Our Hugo Award Finalists — July 27 @ 9:00 p.m. EST
Terry Bisson, Ian MacLeod, Robert Reed, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Bruce Sterling, and Michael Swanwick

Analog's Hugo Finalists — August 10 @ 9:00 p.m. EST
Catherine Asaro, Michael A. Burstein, and Allen Steele

Go to www.scifi.com/chat or link to the chats via our home page (www.asimovs.com). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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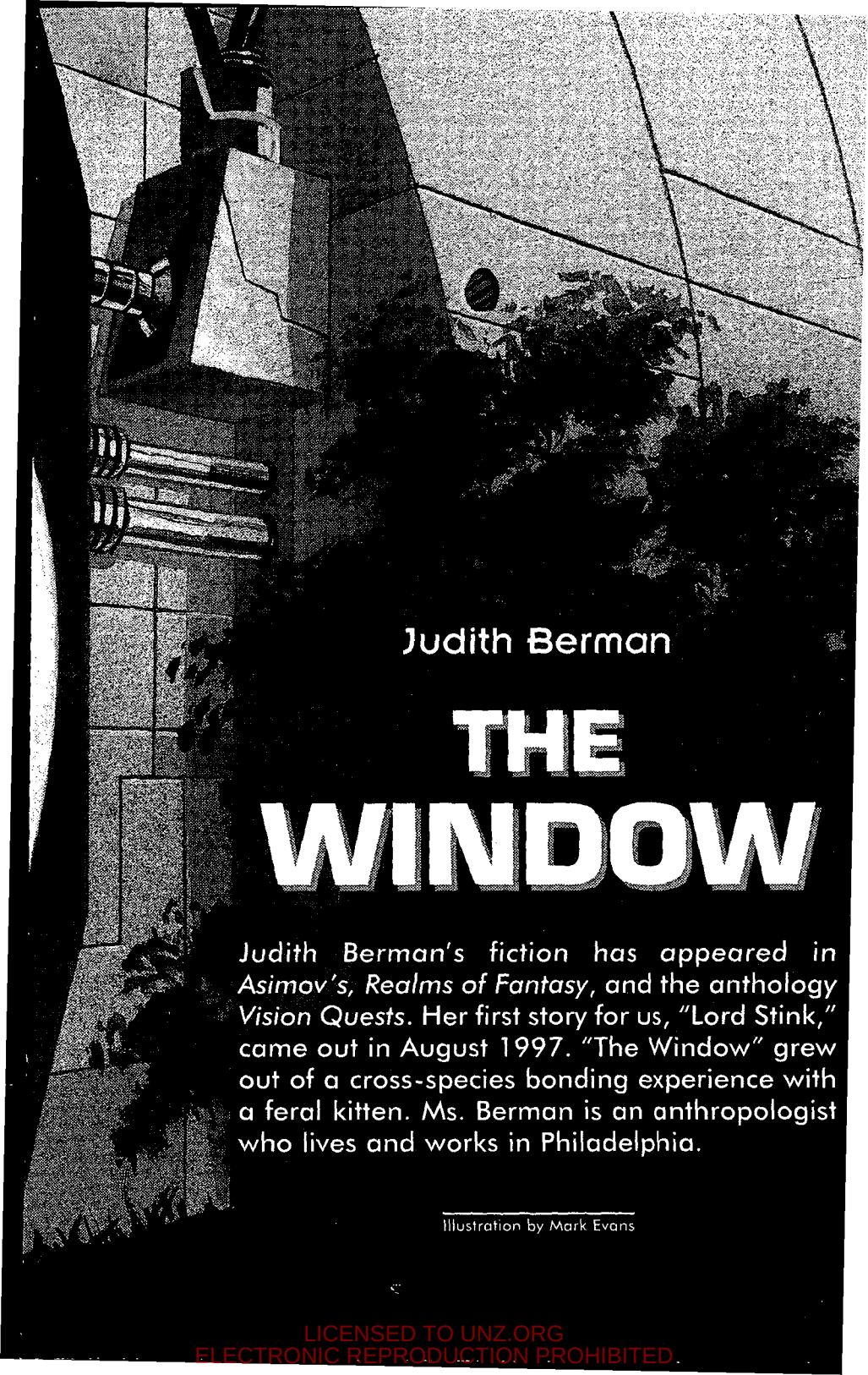

Judith Berman

THE WINDOW

Judith Berman's fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, and the anthology *Vision Quests*. Her first story for us, "Lord Stink," came out in August 1997. "The Window" grew out of a cross-species bonding experience with a feral kitten. Ms. Berman is an anthropologist who lives and works in Philadelphia.

Illustration by Mark Evans

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That morning Frill had locked Onion in the house again, leaving him with nothing to do but stare out the window at the dripping autumn forest. Frill, Onion thought, was always telling him he was special, he was tame, he was her orange-haired sweetheart. But these last few weeks had taught Onion the truth: she kept him in a cage exactly as she did her wolves and box turtles. His cage was just bigger than the rest.

Outside the window, rain fell steadily all morning. When the Muskies filed onto the driveway along the south side of the house, Onion sat bolt upright in surprise. They should not have been able to pass through Frill's fence.

Festooned with all their usual straps and bags, the Muskies spread across the driveway, swept aside fallen leaves and began to quarry Frill's pavement. Onion watched with intense curiosity. On trips into the wilderness Frill had often pointed out to him bands of Muskies hunting, or ruined Muskie dens from the days when, as Frill said, they had overrun the world. But it had always been from an unsatisfactory distance, and always when Onion was leashed and could not investigate on his own. Muskies were as shy of Big Ones as any other animals of the forest. This was the closest Onion had ever been to his own kind.

They were dirty and soaking wet. But they handled their metal tools very cleverly.

He rapped on the window. They did not notice. After a while they moved into the garden and began stripping off ears of corn. Onion banged harder, vibrating in frustration, but the Muskies just turned to the shelter where Frill cured her onions, to the heavy-laden apple trees. When they had filled their bags, they left as cautiously and purposefully as they had come, vanishing into the forest on the far side of the garden fence. It was by far the most interesting thing to happen since Frill had started leaving him at home.

Frill, though, was not at all pleased when she returned and saw the mess. She emerged through the wall of her purple tank and slowly extended several eye- and nosestalks, poking and peering and sniffing at the stretch of mud where her driveway had been. Only then did she step to the ground, and each row of her legs waved distastefully before fastening to the mud and pulling her forward. When she reached the house she swelled up into a perfect sphere and shook herself clean before rolling through the window.

Onion wanted to tell her what he had seen. But all he could do was fart, questioningly, turning his paltry smell-making parts to Frill the way Big Ones did when they talked.

Frill did not answer. Neither did she scoop him up in her usual delighted fashion. Instead she peered at Onion with dozens of eyestalks and asked him, deliberately, *Muskies?*

That was an easy word to recognize: a wisp of muskiness, pronounced with a swell and flutter of intensity that meant *things* that moved around of their own accord: musk-smelling creatures, *Muskies.*

He waved his upper legs at her, in imitation of her nosestalks. *Yes yes.*

She rolled swiftly toward her farspeaker. A brief conversation ensued. When she removed her nosestalks from the farspeaker sockets she tumbled past him again, through the window. She flattened herself and undulated along the overgrown perimeter of the grounds, yelling at the long-vanished Muskies.

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She was still muttering when she returned inside. *Get away!! Stay away!!* Onion scrambled into his den and closed the door tight, but the skunk smell had already settled onto his skin. Frill was truly upset. She had never been so careless before.

It seemed a very long time before Frill poked a couple of eyestalks into his den. A nosestalk sniffed at his cheek. *Onion,* she murmured. The wisp of raw-onion smell floated onto him like a bit of down. Then a gentle cascade of odors: *Oh, I am sorry, little Orange. Oh, such terrible things are happening these days.* She began to groom him, wiping away the skunk smell, kissing his single eye-and-nosestalk with the scent he loved best, perfume of the lilacs that bloomed in the garden in springtime. He pressed into her enveloping warmth. *Onion,* she sang affectionately, *Orange. Onion. Orange.* His name.

Onion wanted to ask her why she was so upset about the Muskies. He wanted to tell her that, cooped up as he had been, he had begun to feel like the mountain lions who paced back and forth in her laboratory cages, their eyes full of rage and longing. He farted a couple of times to catch her attention. She responded by kissing him with a lilac-scented nose and jiggling him up and down. He couldn't really say anything to her. He was only an animal, so he would never be able to speak.

Just as Frill set his dinner on the floor, a silver-pink tank rolled up the road from town. Onion carried his plate to the window.

Frill opened the window and paused on the threshold. *Expecting Diglegs,* Onion managed to pick out of the cold air that leaked into the house. *Who are?*

From Home, said the newcomer. *Sweetmouth Nest Guard.*

Frill's eyestalks dipped in surprise. *Home Nest?*

We have been sent to. Missing Nest Guardians. It is believed their weapons have. Now your house. It is most.

We are in no, said Frill.

It is so believed. It is so decided.

Then Frill moved forward and the window closed behind her, and Onion could only watch while the newcomer and Frill trundled around the garden perimeter, talking, scanning, sniffing. Sweetmouth's velvet legs were a redder purple than Frill's, and her mouth was more puckered, and she was smaller. Her eye- and nosestalks twisted around very slowly and deliberately. When she followed Frill indoors, and her gaze fell upon Onion, they stopped moving altogether.

You keep it in your house? Sweetmouth said, with the precision of extreme distaste.

Oh, yes, Frill said. *It's so soothing to gaze upon this little one.*

This, Sweetmouth said, *is a dangerous animal.*

It's completely tame, said Frill. *I've kept it for years. It's very clever. Sometimes I think it almost has.*

We always knew the Muskies were, Sweetmouth said, quick and harsh now. *Too clever for their own good. But wisdom? They proved long ago. You cannot trust.*

This little one is no threat to, Frill said.

Sweetmouth's nosestalks bristled, pointing aggressively toward Frill. Onion held his breath. Big Ones thought it very bad to argue. *I cannot understand your attachment,* Sweetmouth said. *Next you'll tell me you share food with.*

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Frill did not back down. After a moment she said, almost pleadingly, *Let us talk about what we can agree on. Let us talk about how to keep the wild Muskies from my house.*

There was another pause. Then Sweetmouth's nosestalks turned away slightly from their stiff outthrust position, without relaxing. Onion could not follow most of the tense and rapid conversation that followed. There was a word like *blood, blood coming out,* repeated many times. It was the thing the Nest Guardians from Home were going to do to the Muskies. Frill tried for a long time to persuade her not to do it. *Their numbers are already below the target we,* she said. The two veered dangerously close to argument again. Again Frill tried to bring them back to the subject of her broken fence. *Better to live in town with your nestmates,* Sweetmouth said.

Just then Sweetmouth noticed how close Onion had crept so he could smell more clearly. One eyestalk swiveled around to stare at him, then a dozen eyes, five or six noses.

Get it away, Sweetmouth said loudly, angrily.

It is just curious, said Frill. But she turned to Onion and said, *Go to your den.* Onion reluctantly obeyed.

He did not like this newcomer who *argued* with Frill. None of the Big Ones loved him as much as Frill, but they played with him, and sometimes they picked him up and stroked him, marveling at his brilliant orange hair. *So wonderful,* they would say, *the color, so lovely, so moving.*

Onion was not certain what Sweetmouth meant by the word that was almost *blood coming out.* It was always hard to catch the exact way words faded and swelled in intensity, the exact order in which the little marker-smells that meant nothing and everything clustered around the words. And it was always so hard to smell the fading ends of statements.

Onion remembered how *blood had come out* of his leg, copiously, when he had experimented with Frill's puzzling kitchenware. And *blood had come out* of Frill, cloudy purple and smelling just like the word, the time a crazed Muskie stabbed her with a sharp-pointed stick. Onion, leashed to the tank, had only been able to watch while Frill snapped the stick in two and drove away the creature with skunk-scented shouts.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. Only a few wisps of scent drifted into his den. After a long time he smelled the fragrance of winter squash spiced with raw onions, an extra-potent orange meal that Big Ones usually reserved for a Nest Conclave. He crawled from his den and made his way across the wide floor of Frill's translucent house. Yes, the two Big Ones were feeding each other finally, shiny with exudations, legs interweaving like a nest of garden snakes, nosestalks murmuring back and forth those strange sweet-scented words the Big Ones reserved for such occasions.

Onion climbed the ramp to the window and saw that the day still held one more surprise. A strange yellowish vapor now drifted through the forest beyond the garden, and three tanks were rolling swiftly through the trees. They were silver-pink, which meant they belonged to the Nest Guard. They must be searching for the Muskies who had stolen Frill's driveway.

When Onion woke, sunlight filled the house, and Frill and Sweetmouth were saying goodbye, their nosestalks bobbing and weaving affectionately. He crouched behind the door of his den until he was certain Sweetmouth had really left.

The Big Ones had had to feed each other all night to reach the proper lov-

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ing-tenderness of nestmates. Onion could still smell the fragrance of their exudations, and silver crystals sparkled on the kitchen floor like snow.

After Frill had cleaned the floor with the velvet frills on her legs, she placed a treat on his plate, big slices of walnut and maple-sugar cake that must have been left over from last night's long meal. When he finished, she groomed him thoroughly and lovingly. He drifted into a contented doze.

Then he realized Frill had set him down and was already halfway to the window. He scurried after her, grabbed a leg and yanked.

Little one, it's too dangerous. The Nest Guard will be.

Onion banged on the window, farted desperately. He hated being alone all day, every day. But Frill picked him up and backed through the window, setting him down inside just before it turned solid again. She trundled muddily to her tank and in another moment was gone.

Onion pressed his eyestalk against the window, defeated. There was nothing to do in the house. He had grown to hate all the toys Frill had given him, the knotted hoops, the mazes, the stupid game that said a word when you matched up the right figure of a tank or house or tool. That game had long been much too simple and it just reminded him, mockingly, that he would never talk.

There had to be a way to open the window. There *had* to be!

Very few of Frill's things ignored him. Mostly Frill just told him not to touch something, and he obeyed. But the window encircling the house was different. For as long as he could remember, it had completely refused to acknowledge his touch.

After his accident with the kitchen apparatus, Frill had ordered the house not to let *that* cupboard open for him any more—

Onion crossed the purple floor to the stacks of cupboards surrounding the kitchen. Behind the kitchen was a flat, wide purple pillar that looked like a giant leg. Instead of a frill, though, the house's leg bore upon its surface a few dozen suckers of various colors made for Big-One leg tips thinned fine as grass.

Onion had never detected any smells written upon the pillar. At random, he stuck a piece of the frill at the end of his upper leg into one of the suckers. It sphinctered onto him and clung. He wiggled it. Nothing happened. He tried another one; the same. Most of the suckers were out of reach, so he hauled boxes of toys from his den and stacked them in front of the pillar. Then he set about trying the suckers methodically, one by one. Frill had given him puzzles as hard as this when she was testing him, and he had always solved them. *You are so clever, little one.*

But she would not be pleased by *this.*

It wasn't hard to discover the purple sucker that showed him the three-dimensional model of the house he had once glimpsed behind Frill's bulk. But it took a very long time to find the commands that kept the window from responding to his touch. Finally he managed to make the orange four-legged figure that represented him cling to the house walls. Onion raced to the real window, flung himself at it, hardly daring to hope—

The window dissolved away from his body. His momentum launched him into chilly sunlight, and he landed in the mud with a painful thump. After a few seconds, he looked up. The curving purple wall of the house looked as opaque and solid as it always did from the outside.

From the *outside.*

He stood and turned around. The sharp scent of mud filled his nose. A

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breeze ruffled the wings of the red-gold forest beyond Frill's garden. Overhead, a hawk floated in a cloudless sky.

He was *outside!*

The cold breeze whisked away his body heat. Frill would have dressed him before taking him out in this weather.

Onion wandered through Frill's vast garden. At the far end he reached out a leg carefully, half-expecting a nasty shock, but the fence was still broken. He climbed through the brush.

Near the fence, the forest reeked of skunk. Onion headed further in. Restless sunlight dappled his skin. He caught a low-hanging branch and swung on it for a while, then stopped to look at a lumpy mass beneath a young beech. On closer inspection the lump proved to be covered with something like hide. Onion squatted down and brushed away the orange leaves. And then he was on his feet, vibrating in distress; the lump was a Muskie, yellow scum and dried blood covering its single eyestalk, mouth frozen in a bloody and terrifying yawn.

Blood coming out.

Onion remembered the yellowish vapor drifting through the trees last night, the silver-pink tanks. *Blood coming out.* He began to shiver.

Something touched his shoulder then, as if he had backed into a branch. But he hadn't moved. Onion turned and saw that what touched him was the filthy, scabbed frill of a Muskie's upper leg. This Muskie was very much alive. So were the four others that stood in a clump behind it. Exhilaration that was not quite fear thrilled through him.

They were outfitted in typical Muskie fashion: covered in drab cloth or hide and hung all about with straps and sacks. They also had a few brightly colored tools about them, including a boxy purple fence-opener like Frill's and a silver-pink tube they must have stolen from the Nest Guard. All the Muskies had straggly hair encircling their eye-and-nosestalks. They smelled as though they had not been groomed in a long time.

The Muskie touching Onion's shoulder opened its mouth and vibrated. Disconcerted, Onion took a step backward.

The Muskie vibrated some more, opening and closing its mouth. Onion knew that many wild animals communicated by vibrating. He stared at it, wondering what the creature could want.

Again the Muskie opened its mouth and vibrated. A cold worm of panic burrowed into the pit of Onion's stomach. There was something extremely familiar about those sounds. He felt, strangely, that he should be able to answer, that he could almost understand. He tried to back away, but the Muskie grabbed him. Onion pulled free, rubbing his upper leg. The Muskie was still vibrating at him, louder, urgent.

Then it was as if understanding rushed out of some unknown darkness inside him, transforming noise into words—

"Where are you from?" the Muskie had said. "Did you escape from the Grubs? Can you speak?"

Onion was astonished. The words were as plain as anything Frill had ever said to him. Until that moment he had been certain he remembered nothing of his long-ago days in the wild.

Again the Muskie vibrated at Onion. "How did you get here? Can you understand me? Can you talk?"

Onion wanted desperately to talk. But he couldn't make Muskie-speech.

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All he could do was fart, as if to say, *That's the best answer I can give. I hear you but I can't answer.*

"Leave it, Alfie," said another of the Muskies. "He's a retard. Or maybe the Grubs fucked with his brain. Let's get out of here."

"Do you ever think of anything besides yourself?" said the first Muskie. "This is a precious human child here."

The Muskies hadn't smelled his fart. Or perhaps they smelled it and didn't understand even that simple a communication. This time Onion farted loudly and long to make sure the wind did not blow away the smell, and he waved his upper legs. *Hello hello.*

As if in response, noise sputtered from the mouth of the second Muskie. But it turned away, saying, "Come on, Alfie!"

Disappointment flooded Onion. He was a Muskie, so he couldn't talk to Big Ones; but he couldn't even talk to other Muskies. He had no speech. He would never find anyone to understand him.

"Poor boy," said the first Muskie, "look at him shiver. The Grubs even took away his clothes. Frank, give him your spare coverall."

"Give away good clothes to a retard?" the other Muskie said.

"Frank," said the first Muskie. "That is an order. Give him the coverall."

For a long moment the two Muskies stared at each other, holding their eyestalks rigid. Onion wondered if they were going to fight. But finally the Frank-Muskie said, "Whoop-de-doo, a fucking order." And it turned its eyestalk away, and wriggled out of some of the straps crisscrossing its body. From a sack it pulled a much-wrinkled construction of brown cloth that it held out to Onion.

The cloth was scratchy and dirty, and reeked of animal musk and burnt wood. Onion struggled into it anyway. At least he was instantly warmer.

Then the Alfie-Muskie said, "We'll take the boy with us. You two," it waved its upper leg at some of the other Muskies, "you carry Tony. Hop to it. We've been here too long already."

"Are you out of your mind?" Frank asked.

"We can't leave him with the Grubs."

"He's a retard," said Frank. "Let the Grubs feed him."

"He's a *child,*" said the Alfie-Muskie. "His genes might be good even if his brain is gone."

"Oh, come on," said Frank, "you think Peter's going to breed *him?*"

"We've got to get out of here," Alfie said in a harsh, thin way. "Now!"

While Frank and Alfie were arguing, the other Muskies wrapped their dead fellow in a blanket and lifted the bundle onto a cloth fastened to two long poles. That Muskies argued all the time didn't surprise Onion; Frill had explained often enough about animal nature. But he had never been near so much raw and careless anger. It was worse than the argument between Sweetmouth and Frill, because the anger was so casual, it was obvious the Muskies fought every day.

Still, as soon as Onion thought of them departing, he felt a sharp pang of loss. They were his own kind. He wanted to visit their dens, see how they lived.

They hoisted the poles, one Muskie at each end. "Come on," one of them said to Onion.

Another pulse of excitement thrilled through him. Frill would never have allowed it.

They headed up the valley, stopping frequently to bend their eyestalks

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around in search of vibrations. Cold wind tossed the treetops, and orange leaves danced across the forest floor. Onion listened to the Muskies as they strode along, their words soft and sparse now.

"Let me spell you."

"Did you hear something?"

"Watch for Grubs."

Rich smells rose up as they tramped through the leaves: humus, moldering wood, uprooted mushrooms. Onion spied an antlered buck in the distance, who watched them nervously, head alert. Squirrels bounded from branch to branch.

Once they huddled in a stand of hemlocks while a silver-pink airboat raced overhead, whirring.

"That's a model I haven't seen before."

"Peter says a shuttle landed at South Port last week. The Grubs pulled a hangar over it before unloading, so they couldn't see what came off."

"More Grubs."

"New helicopters, at least."

"Jesus help us."

They hiked until the sun dropped behind the ridge and the sky turned purple. Finally they reached a concrete-walled ruin. Inside, Onion discovered other Muskies squatting around a fire. A heap of sacks lay in the corner, bulging with vegetables and chunks of Frill's pavement. So these *were* the Muskies he had seen yesterday.

"Success," Alfie said to the Muskies by the fire. Alfie's companions set down the stretcher beside the sacks of pavement.

"Oh, yeah," said Frank, "big fucking success. We brought back the body of a man who died because you're an asshole, Alfie."

Alfie took a deep breath. "I forgive you, Frank," Alfie said, "because I know you are grieving for Tony just as I am."

"Well, I don't forgive you," said Frank. "You as good as killed him."

Onion eyed the fire. Frill said that Muskies used it all the time, but the naked flames unnerved him. Still, he could feel heat pouring off. He edged closer very cautiously and sat.

One of the Muskies thrust a few ears of Frill's corn into the coals. Another handed Onion a shredded chunk of dried deer meat in a dirty bowl. Alfie casually hacked apart one of the onions and distributed the pieces. "Want some?" Alfie asked Onion.

Onion pulled his bowl back, startled; the Big Ones reserved onions for occasions requiring the most moving and powerful foods, and never had Frill allowed him so much as a taste. Frank grabbed the pungent slice and waved it in Onion's face. "Oh, look, the retard's scared of onions."

"Frank!" Alfie said. "Don't torment the boy!"

Frank dropped the slice in its own bowl and began to eat.

Onion finished his meat and then a share of singed corn. No one offered him more. He inched closer to the fire; sensation began to return to the ends of his lower legs. He wondered what Frill would think when she returned home to find him gone.

"Now, young man, I'm going to ask you some questions," said Alfie. The tall, thin Muskie held up the frill of its upper leg and folded most of the frill over. "How many fingers am I holding up? One? Two? Three? Can you show me? Do you know what I'm saying?"

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It was a stupid test. Onion held up his upper leg, folding the frill down to mimic the Muskie's.

"Very good," said Alfie, "that was two fingers. How many fingers is this? Can you show me?" And then, when Onion unfolded part of his frill, "Good, good, three fingers. Now, do you know what *add* means?" Alfie showed Onion *two* on one frill and *three* on the other. "How many do you get if you add three and two?"

Of course, Onion thought, you could not expect Muskie tests to be as sophisticated as Frill's. Muskies were only animals. He unfolded his frill completely and wriggled it.

Alfie let out a gust of air. "He understands. He can add."

"He's a fucking genius," said Frank.

In early morning they set out through a bank of heavy fog. Then the fog burned away into another bright, cold, windy autumn day. The Muskies' den seemed to be far away, but Onion did not mind. He thought he could walk forever through the flying leaves, the scents that swelled and vanished on the wind. This was Frill's favorite season, too, when the forest turned red and orange, when it was *filled with light,* as she said.

At midday they stopped to eat. Alfie gave him more number tests.

"It's amazing," said Alfie. "He hasn't made a single mistake. What's your name? I know you can understand me. What's your name, young man?"

Onion wanted badly to respond, but he was trapped by his own tameness.

"My name's Alfonse, Alfonse Smith," Alfie said. "What's your name?"

He was not going to try farting again. Wild Muskies certainly couldn't understand smells. Even outside, in the cold wind, Muskie scents flooded over him; woodsmoke, body musk, hair oil, meaty breath. A Big One would never stand to have such a noisy chaos of smells emitting from her person.

"Can you talk?" Alfie asked. "What's your name?"

Onion knew it so well, the sharp, warm, pungent smell the Big Ones loved so much. But he did not know it in Muskie speech.

Then, unexpectedly, the sounds Frank had made last night echoed in his mind. *Onions.* He opened his mouth and vibrated the way Muskies did. "Aah," he heard.

The Muskies twisted their eyestalks to stare at Onion. "The poor boy," said Alfie. "What did they do to him?"

"Aah," Onion vibrated, trying out sounds. "Nn, yan. Un, yun."

"Now you've got him all worked up," said Frank.

"He's trying to talk," said Alfie.

Frank rose and adjusted some of the straps encircling its body. "He's just grunting. Let's get a move on."

"An, yun," Onion said. "Un-yun, anyun, unyun." He was sure those were the right sounds. But they didn't understand him.

They spent the night in another ruin. Alfie set to testing Onion some more, puzzles, stick mazes to trace his way out of, and then they played yes-and-no questions.

Onion was used to being tested. The Big Ones tested him all the time, debating. Frill would say, *The little one is almost wise. When you tame Muskies, they are almost wise.*

Sixtynose would say, *Wisdom is more than knowing tricks. It is more than imitating how a person acts. It is understanding.*

Alfie seemed only to want to know if Onion was clever. Onion knew he

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was clever. But Sixtynose was right. He did not *understand* anything important: how to talk, why an animal like himself longed to be a person, why the color orange filled Big Ones to overflowing with love and awe. *The color of light,* they said.

He was ravenous; they never gave him enough food. And he had never been so sore and tired in his life. A strange thing started happening. One moment he would be walking in rustling light, beneath trees that cast orange wings endlessly at the blue sky. Then a fog of despair would roll over him, enveloping him in a dream where he was fearfully walking, walking, no place to stop. *Are they following us? Will they find us?*

And then he would shake himself and the dream would dissolve; he would find himself happy again. He was learning about his own kind. He was in the wilderness, free, no leash, no walls, no window. The sun still danced and spun over his head through leaves that were as translucent as shell, bright as fire.

On the third day they began to traverse up the side of one of the mountains. Maple and beech gave way to pine, and still they climbed endlessly, into scrubby brush and granite and wind. The summit reached higher than Onion had ever been. The wind grew bitterly cold. Finally they climbed over the top, and the world sank away from their feet. Onion stopped in his tracks.

The mountains stretched out in all directions, fold after orange fold, to a horizon that promised more mountains beyond it unrolling into infinity. Light seemed to pulse out of earth and sky. Even the Muskies' faces seemed filled with it, as fine and delicate as leaves. He felt the wind trying to rip him loose and fling him to the horizon. *Filled with light.*

This was his home, here, in the mountains, with his own kind. Now he knew the real reason Frill refused to take him into the wilderness unleashed. She knew he would never want to come back. He heard himself vibrating with joy. He felt a touch upon his shoulder, and turned. Alfie's hair-covered mouth curved upward at each end.

Then the mouth straightened, and Alfie said, "Look," and pointed. Miles away, a tiny airboat crept along a ridge top.

"Let's get moving!" Alfie called.

Ice-cold water and the odor of dank earth poured from a narrow opening in the mountainside. One by one the Muskies crouched down and squeezed into darkness.

Alfie produced a lightstick stolen from the Big Ones, and they waded onward. Onion glimpsed rusty girders, side galleries fading into darkness. Eventually they splashed out of the stream. Light began to diffuse into the tunnels. They passed a Muskie sentry, with whom Alfie exchanged a few words. Then they rounded a corner into a concrete-floored den so large that it dwarfed the fifty or so Muskies, the most Onion had ever seen in one place, who huddled around half a dozen campfires. Even so vast a space reeked of smoke, ungroomed animals, and burned meat.

The Muskies in the den began to make noise and surge toward Alfie and his band. Everyone gabbled back and forth so swiftly and in such numbers that Onion could not follow. He heard *how did, Grubs, Tony, gas,* until Alfie lifted its frill and shouted, "People!" The crowd fell more or less silent. "They didn't touch him," said Alfie. "We got the body in time."

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"Gas," said a small, delicately built Muskie that stood nearby. "What a horrible way to die."

This Muskie caught Onion's attention. It looked young, and was apparently what Frill would call an egg-maker; it bore hair only upon the upper part of its eyestalk. Exudations leaked from its eyes and ran down in two glittering tracks, but it looked as stiff with anger as Onion had ever seen Frank or Alfie.

"He died in glory, Sara," said Alfie, laying a frill on the small Muskie's shoulder. "He died defending us from the Beast. He's safe in Jesus' arms now."

The small Muskie pushed Alfie's hand away violently. "You damned Crusaders! Everything you touch turns bloody! He shouldn't have died at all!"

"Sara, don't blame Alfie," said another Muskie, who had white hair and sagging skin netted with coarse lines. "The Grubs killed Tony."

"Don't blame Alfie?" Frank said. "She should blame Alfie! He fucked up! We were just supposed to get those power cells, in and out. But he has the brilliant idea to go back to attack the Grubs. Of course the Grubs were waiting!"

"We must strike at the Beast any way we can," said Alfie.

"The Grubs have been all stirred up since Alfie's stunt last month," Frank said. "And now they're hunting Crusaders again. All the way back we saw helicopters, searching. If Alfie thinks they won't be able to find us, he isn't playing with any more cards than this retard he brought with us."

Alfie had been growing more and more rigid, and now it said, "Don't you care that we're fighting a war here? What can be more important than killing the Beast?"

"Surviving," said Frank. "*Surviving.*"

"That's enough, gentlemen," said the white-haired Muskie.

Frank and Alfie stared at each other, breathing hard. Onion could feel the unspoken anger choking the air, from them, from Sara, from the restless, muttering crowd. Frill was right; wild Muskies had no wisdom at all. They were always angry. If the Big Ones tamed them, as Frill had tamed Onion, they would have much nicer lives.

But Frill said only young animals could be tamed. Onion wondered if the Muskie called Sara, who was still leaking exudations, was sufficiently young.

"Why don't you tell me who this stranger is?" asked the white-haired Muskie.

Alfie's eyestalk twisted toward Onion. "This is a child we rescued from the Grubs."

"He's some kind of retard," Frank said.

"He understands what you say to him," said Alfie. "He's very bright. I think he has been traumatized by the Grubs and can no longer speak. Or perhaps there has been some brain damage."

The white-haired Muskie stepped up to Onion. "Do you understand me, kid?"

Onion bent his eyestalk backward and forward as they had shown him. *Yes.*

"What's your name? Can you tell me your name?"

"Yun, yan," said Onion. "Unyan."

"All he can say are nonsense syllables," said Alfie.

* * *

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The Muskie den was lit by a row of empty-eyed openings that ran along one side of the room. Onion crossed the floor and leaned out into the wind. The huge den was part of a cliffhouse attached to the bony shoulder of a mountain. Below, Muskie gardens lay in patches across a floodplain. The long mountain ridge curved a few miles away, boxing in the valley and hiding it from any who did not have eyes in the air.

Now Muskies appeared at the foot of the cliffhouse and spread along the streamside. Some of them began to dig a hole in the ground.

"Friend," called Alfie. "Why don't you come with us?"

Onion followed Alfie and Peter, the white-haired Muskie, to a concrete stairway that led down to afternoon sunlight. The Sara-Muskie sat on the grass, all four legs wrapped tight, not far from the Muskies digging the hole. It watched as Frank and several others laid out chunks of Frill's black translucent pavement along the stream bank.

Peter hunkered down and put a frill on Sara's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Sara looked away. "I'll be okay." Its voice sounded clogged and raw, as if it hurt to speak.

For a few moments they were silent. Then Peter said to Alfie, "Why don't you show me what your foundling can do?"

Alfie gestured to Onion to sit. And then Alfie began again with the tests. Sara watched them silently. Once in a while it wiped exudations from its nose.

"Un, yun," Onion said, as he added and subtracted and solved Alfie's tedious riddles. "Un, yun, un-yun, unyun." He didn't know what was wrong with his sounds.

The Muskies working on the hole dug deeper and deeper until only their eyestalks poked above the ground. Alfie moved on to yes-and-no, different questions this time. "Where do you come from? Do you know where your people are?"

Onion twisted his eyestalk, *no*: he didn't know where Frill was right now, in the laboratory or out in the wilderness, taking care of the forest; and Sixtynose, Frill's favorite nestmate, had disappeared weeks ago. "Al," he tried. "Pee, fee. Fee. Yoo, yer, nnn. Ame." But the Muskies didn't understand those sounds, either.

Sara stirred finally, sniffling. "He's trying to say something."

"He's trying, but he can't," said Alfie. "It pains me to see it."

"Sare!" Onion shouted, frustrated almost beyond endurance. "Yer nn, ame!"

She stared at him. Then, "*Sara,*" she said. "My name is *Sara.*"

Onion's pulse seemed to stop for a moment. "My, name," he said, "is Onion."

There was a long silence. Sara and Alfie and Peter looked at him. "Unyun?" Sara asked, wiping her nose again. "What kind of name is *that?* Where do you come from?"

This time Onion heard the sounds in his mind even though no one had said them before. *Big Ones.* It was like the memory of a dream coming back to him, where all words had sounds and his mouth was used to shaping them.

"Buh," he said. "Big. W—, w—, wuns."

"Big Ones?" asked Sara. She moved closer, so close that Onion could have touched her.

"Big Ones, bee. Kuz," Onion said. "Because of my." The word eluded him, so he grabbed the hair on top of his eyestalk and showed them.

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"Hair?" she asked. "Unyun means hair?"

"Ss-mell," Onion said. "Onion smell. The, the smell is, like the, the. The color. Orange."

"The color orange smells like an onion?" Peter said, slowly.

Onion twisted his eyestalk *no*. "Onion smells orange. It, has, aah, an orange smell."

"Peter," said Sara, clapping a frill over her mouth, "he means the Grubs. The Grubs gave him that name. He can *talk* to them!"

"Can. Nt," said Onion. "Talk to. Big Ones. Only, listen."

There was another silence. "Lord have mercy," said Alfie, finally. "How long did they keep him prisoner?"

But Peter stuck out the frill of his upper leg toward Onion. "Well, Orange," he said, "welcome back to the human race. My name is Peter Milano."

The sound-word came to Onion, *hand.* He was not sure what the gesture meant. Big Ones touched noses when they exchanged names.

"You know my name." Sara reached out and took Onion's frill, his *hand,* in her own.

It was the first time he had felt the bare flesh of a Muskie. The smoothness and firmness of Sara's hand was very different from the yielding velvet of a Big One. A tingling ran up Onion's upper leg, his *arm,* and down the length of his body. Sara had a smell, too, but only a faint, pleasing one; she was better groomed than the unkempt band that had brought him here.

Then Onion thought, *she.*

She and *he.*

Muskies, he realized, had words for the formless notions that had always existed in his head. Big Ones did not. *He* had always been himself. Up till now only Big Ones had been *she*: vast, warm, delighted, attentive, the source of boundless comfort. Now he saw that *she* was something else as well: something as small and needy as himself, something angry as an animal, beautiful as the odor of lilacs.

When the digging Muskies were satisfied with their hole, the entire band gathered around it. Several Muskies lowered the bundled corpse and Alfie made a long speech about dust and judgment. Afterward, Alfie tried to talk to Sara, but she turned from him without a word.

Everyone went back inside. Peter, mouth twisting slightly, told Sara to take Onion away and fetch him some dry clothes.

Sara led him up a flight of stairs and down a corridor to a small den lit by the sunset. She did not speak to him, turned away even as he stripped off the nasty wet clothes and groomed himself as best he could with the rags she handed him. Frill would be upset at how dirty he had gotten.

But when he had put on the new clothes, dry and warm but just as smelly and scratchy, she turned back. They looked at each other in silence for a long moment. For as long as he could remember, Onion had thought of himself as a kind of Big One, only deficient. Muskies had seemed so strange. But in the last few days the memory of a dream had been coming back to him. In the dream Muskies were ordinary, their sounds and smells comforting. In the dream he was just like them, ordinary. He was not after all deficient. He was what he was meant to be.

"How old are you?" Sara asked him, finally. "I'm sixteen. You look my age. But I don't know. I've hardly ever seen any boys."

"Boys?" Onion said. He understood that the word included him.

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"There was Tony. But he was much older than me, a man really—" She stopped suddenly, and liquid began to leak from her eyes again. A large vibration of distress shook her. "He, Tony, I didn't like him, really. We weren't close. But we, we—"

Onion did what Frill would have done to comfort her, what he realized he had wanted to do from the beginning. He reached out and pulled Sara against him, and stroked her face, her long hair, her small and delicate hands. He wished he knew how to make the smell of lilacs.

After a few moments Sara wiped her eyes and pushed away. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

She led him toward the smell of food, back to the large den with the campfires. There was venison with roast apples and potatoes, and corn in a thick porridge. Sara piled it all onto a plate, and then she handed Onion a strange metal Muskie tool that looked a bit like a miniature arm, a straight piece ending in four little fingers. Onion turned it over.

"You've never seen a fork before?" Sara took it back from him, stabbed a piece of venison, and lifted it toward his mouth.

Onion's heart seemed to stop beating. His mouth must have dropped open, because the next thing he knew, the hot chunk of meat sat squarely upon his tongue. "Like that," Sara said.

When Big Ones fed each other, they never used tools. And they sat with flesh pressed together, mouths almost touching, legs and eyes and nose-stalks twining sinuously. When Onion had swallowed he put his hand on the fork, gently, in case he had misunderstood. Sara let him have it. Hands shaking, he stabbed at another piece of venison and lifted it to her mouth.

The corners of her mouth curved upward just a little. "No, silly," she said. "I was just showing you how to use it." But she opened her mouth and, white teeth catching the firelight, tongue and lips working delicately, she took the venison from him.

A wave of joy flooded through Onion, swelling in his throat and stinging his eyes. He had been so lonely in Frill's house. Now he, too, had a nestmate.

"Why are you crying?" Sara asked.

"I," Onion began. "I'm." Another exquisite wave crested and broke. Now he could answer such questions; he had remembered how to talk. He had climbed through the window. He was part of the world. "I'm here," he said, tears trickling down his face.

After they had eaten, Peter called them to his campfire. Peter sat in a construction, a *chair,* carved out of a substance Onion had never seen before, rose-colored spongy stuff that was firm but yielding to the touch.

"I've been thinking, kid," said Peter, "since I first saw you. There was a girl from a band that used to camp down along the Delaware. She had your look. Same coloring—carroty hair. Green eyes. She was one of the resistant ones. She had a baby, must have been about fifteen, sixteen years ago. I guess I know just about every child born in the Delaware and Susquehanna headwaters in the last fifty years—the Lord knows, there haven't been many. Which river do you come from?"

"I don't know," said Onion. Frill had taken him to a big river several times. Once they had traveled out upon its expanse with a pair of Big Ones who were taking care of the water, and downriver, hazy with distance,

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Onion had seen what must be the biggest cliffhouses on the face of the earth, tall as mountains.

"Do you remember your mother, kid? Do you remember her name?"

"I don't know," Onion said. The word *mother* sounded strange to his ears, and then, all at once, familiar.

"Her people were Crusaders. I heard she and her kid were caught in the massacre after the big raid on South Port—what was it, ten, eleven years ago now? But I see that wasn't true." Peter reached down and patted Onion on the shoulder. "You survived, at least. You have good genes, Orange. Resistant, you know what that means? Lucky for all of us Alfie found you. Lucky you have a pretty good dose of intelligence. You and Sara, you stick together. You two are our future, do you understand?"

"Sure," Onion said. He hadn't the faintest idea what Peter was talking about. He glanced at Sara; she was looking down at her hands. This talk about Big Ones killing Muskies upset him. Frill never killed any Muskies; she just shouted at them.

"Tell me," said Peter, "Do you know why they kept you prisoner, kid? Instead of killing you with the rest?"

"I'm not a, I wasn't," Onion began, and then stopped. He had indeed been a kind of prisoner, in a cage built of Frill's whims. But the Muskies kept making it sound cruel. "They—I—" He struggled for a moment with the word *frill,* and gave up. "She takes, took care of me. My, my Big One I lived with. She just wouldn't let me go out."

"*My?*" Peter's face twisted, and his voice turned harsh and full of anger. "Don't say *my*. The Grubs are not *your* anything except your mortal enemy." The old Muskie rose to his feet again. "Let me show you something."

He disappeared into the smoky gloom; a moment later he returned holding a box. Inside were loose, brittle sheets with colored images on them. Peter handled the pages very carefully. It took Onion a moment to realize the images were Muskies. Muskies brightly clothed and beautifully groomed. Muskies driving sleek, four-wheeled vehicles that looked swift as the wind. Muskies entering and leaving cliffhouses, only these weren't ruins, they were cloaked in shimmering glass. Muskies playing with toys amid vast open green spaces, not a tree or other creature in sight.

"This was *our* world, kid," said Peter fiercely, "before the Grubs came. Don't ever forget it." He leaned close to Onion. "Don't ever, *don't ever* forget they killed your mother."

That word again, *mother*; Onion didn't know whom or what Peter meant. But the word pulled up something from deep inside him, a memory of a dream, anguish, love, longing. A dream of comfort, of a vast and omniscient *she,* a beautiful song holding him as close as two strong arms. *Mother* was something like Frill, only older and deeper. Between him and *mother* was a cold blank space that he did not know how to cross. Yet on the other side of that space—

Safe in the arms of Jesus, she sang . . .

A dream; it was cold, they were walking, walking. *Are they following us? Will they find us?* She hushed him.

Onion pushed at Peter's chair as though to push away the word *mother,* only to realize that Peter had left to put away his box. The chair, light as air, skittered across the floor.

"So you like my chair, do you?" Peter laughed as he scooted it back to the fireside. "I bet you've never seen the insides of a Grub before, kid. They

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don't have bones like you or me. You just skin 'em and leave 'em in the weather long enough, and they shrink right up. This is what's left. I just carved it a bit with a pocket knife."

"Skin them?" Onion said, staring at the chair. The bitter smell of Muskie anger billowed over him. Skin them?

Blood coming out.

He saw Frill again as on that day years ago, the crude spear sticking in her side, the crazed Muskie shouting, Frill's *blood coming out* onto the leaves. . . .

And then, all at once, he understood what Frank and Alfie had been talking about. *The Grubs have been all stirred up since Alfie's stunt last month.*

What can be more important than killing the Beast?

Missing Nest Guardians, Sweetmouth had said. And who could she have meant but Sixtynose, gone for many days now?

Alfie had killed Sixtynose, Frill's beloved friend. Sixtynose, who had bounced Onion and tugged on his hair with velvet legs, who had played Spice with him more times than he could remember. . . .

The stench of woodsmoke and poorly groomed Muskies was suddenly nauseating. Onion climbed to his feet, stumbled across the room to the stairway, and ran down it, throwing open the door into clean, frosty air. He closed his eyes.

Blood coming out.

A footstep sounded behind him. A hand touched his shoulder. He turned to look. Sara's hand moved to his cheek, a feather's touch. The tide of nausea receded.

"You don't like to hurt things, not even Grubs," Sara said. "Tony liked to hurt things. I hate the Grubs for killing Tony. But if I killed them wouldn't I be just like him? I just wish they'd go away and leave us alone." She started to cry again.

Onion put his arms around her, and buried his face in her hair. They stood there together for a long time while she sobbed into his shoulder. Her warmth spread along his entire body.

Finally Sara wiped away her tears. "Let's go," she whispered.

She led him by the hand through the lightless maze of corridors and stairs, to the room where she had taken him earlier. Under the scratchy, smoke-infested covers of her bed, she undressed him.

"I'm glad Alfie found you," she said. "I'm so glad you've come to live with us."

What she did then was almost like being groomed by Frill, except that it was stranger, better, sweeter. It was the sweetest thing that had ever happened to him. It filled him with anguish, and exhilaration almost like fear, and astounded delight. He felt torn loose, the way the autumn wind tears away a leaf and throws it to the sky. Each gust carried him farther and farther, spinning him high over granite-boned mountains aflame with autumn, over cold river valleys, lakes and bogs; mountain after folded mountain, bearing him beyond the horizon to his long-lost home.

Thunder exploded into Onion's dreams. "Orange," Peter was shouting. "The Grubs are here!" He pulled Onion out of bed, and thrust a musty-smelling snout over Onion's face, strapped it on. "Grab your clothes and come on!" Peter held a lightstick, but he was not wearing a snout.

The next thing Onion knew he was running through a maze of corridors with Sara and Peter and several other Muskies. His breath sounded hol-

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lowly inside the snout. They crossed the big concrete room where the campfires were now extinguished. Huge slabs had fallen from the ceiling, and Onion caught glimpses of dead Muskies, rubble, dark pools of blood.

Alfie appeared. "Gas," he shouted. "Back, go back!"

More Muskies, more running through darkened corridors and up and down endless flights of stairs. Thunder rumbled through the mountain, and the concrete shifted under their feet. Then they were outside, in bitter cold. Airboats whirred high overhead. Hard white ellipses of light slid across valley and mountainside.

Whump. Whump. Yellowish vapor puffed from the mountainside. Cones of brightly lit smoke stretched upward to the airboats. "Come on!" Peter screamed at him. "Don't stop!"

A spot of brilliant light swam through the forest toward Onion, and he instinctively dodged behind a tree. The light fell upon the body of a woman who lay crumpled in the leaves. Onion took her arm. But her arm was limp, her body heavy, and as he pulled, her body rolled onto its back and he saw dark blood spilling into the leaves.

Blood coming out.

Peter grabbed Onion and knocked him flat; a pair of vibrations punched him in the ears. Burning shards rained from the sky. The ellipse of light tilted, and then an airboat smashed into the mountainside not a hundred yards away, bursting into flame. Big Ones tumbled out, screaming. Those were new smells, the stink of agony and burning velvet—

More explosions. Muskies scrambled among the Big Ones, hacking weapons from their flailing legs. "Let's go!" Peter said, pulling Onion to his feet. They stumbled away through the trees, while behind them airboats continued to wade with feet of light through a sea of yellowish smoke, and the mountainside thundered, crumbling into rubble.

They were walking, walking, no place to stop. The dark forest slanted on forever.

Later they stopped in a ruined Muskie den. The concrete floor leached all warmth out of Onion. He sat beside Sara with his arms wrapped around his knees, wishing he could slip into the lake of sleep and bury himself in the mud like a frog in winter. But he kept seeing Muskies in pools of blood, Big Ones writhing in flames. . . .

He dreamed a little, once. It was morning, and he discovered how to escape from Frill's house. In the forest he once more came upon the Muskie corpse, only this time the corpse was his mother's. Onion had forgotten her face until now, but in the dream he knew that she was the most important thing in the world. Her blood was bright and fresh, and it flooded from her mouth, pouring over her orange hair and the sunlit orange leaves, spreading across the floor of the entire world. She was the most important thing in the world, and she was dead. There was nothing Onion could do except stand there crying.

The road wound along the side of the mountain. A cold wind shook the scanty leaves over their heads. Frank's party returned from scouting the road ahead and at last Peter called a rest. The Muskies collapsed at the side of the road.

Peter appeared beside Onion, grim-faced. "Come on, kid. No, Sara, you stay here."

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Onion followed him down the hill to an outcropping of rock, where some of the men stood around a cloth-covered lump. "Take a good look, kid," said Peter. "Take a look at what your Grubs get up to."

Onion looked, reluctantly but carefully. He thought the human had been dead for a while. At some point a Big One's tank had rolled over the body, crushing the legs, and the face and chest were missing large chunks of flesh.

"Your Grubs were feeding here," said Peter.

That was one of the stupidest things Onion had ever heard. "Grubs didn't eat him," he said. "They don't eat humans."

"We've all seen it," said Peter.

"But," Onion said, "they just eat, plants. And they can't make, make, marks like that. They don't have, teeth. It looks like—" The pictures were clear in his mind, *wolf, coyote, feral dog,* but he couldn't remember the sound-words.

"I've seen them," Frank said, his face twisting. "They pull off strips of flesh, tear out the organs, and cram it into their mouths—"

"No," Onion said. "They take, um, bits to look at later, they watch if, if wild animals are healthy—"

"I've seen it!" Frank shouted.

"They killed your mother," Peter said hoarsely. For some reason he started crying. "They might even have eaten your mother."

"But," Onion said. It was no use. They didn't understand him.

Suddenly he saw his mother, whose face he had forgotten, bleeding into the leaves. An all-engulfing grief welled up from the darkness inside him. He looked away from Peter.

"The Big Ones," Onion said, trying to swallow the lump in his throat, "the Big Ones who, who take care of the forest don't want to hurt the, the humans. But they can't argue with the Big Ones who, protect the home, the, the nest. Big Ones don't argue. My Big One never hurt any humans. She just scares them away. But she can't argue. Protecting the other Big Ones is not her, it's not what she does. So once the humans hurt a Big One, she can't say."

Peter did not answer for a long moment. Finally he wiped his eyes, and said, "Listen to me, kid. You've been with the Grubs a long time. You've never been told the truth. But let me tell you. I was there. There aren't many of us left who are old enough to remember what it was like, and we won't be around much longer, so you have to remember carefully. This was our world. They destroyed it all. They destroyed the human race."

"But—" Onion tried to say.

"They gave us plagues," Peter said. "They turned whole continents into wasteland. Billions died—"

"But," Onion said, "it was the, the humans who turned the world into wasteland. There were too many. They had no wisdom."

Peter continued as though Onion hadn't spoken. "People thought it was the end of time, it was God's punishment, but it was just Grubs stealing our world. They only showed themselves after we had become so weak we couldn't fight back. When we're completely gone, they'll fill up the earth with Grubs. We can't let that happen, do you understand? We can't let them have our world!"

"But," Onion said, "They're not trying to destroy the humans. It was the, the other, the other way. They were trying to, to save humans. The Big Ones came here to take care of the world. My Big One said—"

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Onion felt the Muskie sound-words slipping from his grasp; he had never quite understood Frill, anyway, when she tried to explain to him, *this is the most important thing, this is the world's soul, this is the color of light.* "My Big One told me that every world has, has, a, a, something, the most beautiful thing there is—"

"This is our world," said Peter, "and they took it."

"The most important thing," Onion said. "But this world was being killed. It was the, the saddest thing the Big Ones had ever seen. The Big Ones who say what is important, they said it had to be stopped. The Big Ones aren't trying to destroy the, the humans; they're just trying to bring back, bring back the, the most important thing—"

Peter laughed at Onion. "They've brainwashed you, kid," he said. "They're treating us like animals."

"But," said Onion, "we are animals, aren't we?"

"Jesus," said Peter. "Was your mother an animal? Do you think Sara deserves to die like an animal? Hunted down and slaughtered and *eaten?*"

Onion looked back to where Sara sat beside the road, grimy, smelly and exhausted, and imagined what it would be like if she had been killed last night, if she now lay bleeding into the fallen leaves. Horror and grief coursed through him at the mere thought. Peter was wrong. He *was* an animal, and no longer a tame one. He would do anything, maybe even hurt a Big One, if it would save Sara.

"Hey," Frank said. Onion turned to look.

Tiny at this distance, a single purple tank wound steadily toward them, tracking over stones and fallen trees, wheeling through streams, climbing ever upward.

"Get everyone ready to move out fast," said Peter.

Muskies clambered wearily to their feet. Then Alfie and his scouts came running down the road from the ridgetop. "Helicopters approaching from the south and east," Alfie panted. "Recommend we head down the valley, try to reach the river. We might be able to lose them if we can make it to water—"

Peter pointed to the lone purple tank heading up the mountainside.

"We can take out a single tank," said Alfie.

The tank rolled along. The Muskies kept glancing at the ridge top behind them. Then the tank stopped for no apparent reason. The ramp dropped down. A Big One rolled through the side of the tank and began trundling in their direction.

"Holy Jesus," said Alfie, "it doesn't know we're here." He pulled the silver-pink tube from his belt.

"No," said Peter, "wait till it gets close enough to use a grenade."

The Big One's nosestalks twisted this way and that, as though smelling intently, or calling in all directions. "Goddamn, they're ugly," said Frank. "Glad I didn't eat anything this morning."

Ugly. Onion tried to see that sagging many-legged velvet ball from the Muskies' point of view, a horrible misshapen monster, a cold-blooded destroyer of uncountable Saras and Tonys, of uncountable mothers and sons, brothers and sisters, lovers.

He couldn't do it. All he could think of was the smell of lilacs, and Frill murmuring to him, stroking his hair.

But there was something implacable about the Big Ones. The way Frill had always kept him caged and leashed, even though he was completely

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tame. There was something merciless, kind but merciless, about the Big Ones' treatment of animals.

The sun came out from behind a cloud. The wind threw up a squall of brilliant leaves. Onion remembered what he had seen from the mountaintop, the whole world filled with wind and light, all singing out to him of his own wildness. All calling him home. *The color of light. The most important thing.*

And he remembered Sara's hand on his cheek as she fed him. He remembered her arms and legs twining around him, exhilaration and passion seizing him.

Never forget they killed your mother.

The most important thing.

Alfie pulled out a silver-pink egg, and rose to his knees. The Big One trundled closer, nosestalks twisting this way and that, shouting to the wind. She climbed over a knuckle of granite, waded through a stand of laurel. Wind spiraled up the valley, bearing a faint, unseasonal smell, a pungent warm smell. The scent of raw onion.

It was, it *was* Frill.

She was calling to him. She hoped or guessed or knew that he was right here, with this band of Muskies.

Onion, come home.

Alfie twisted the knob at one end of the grenade, and cocked his arm. "No," said Onion, and he threw himself onto Alfie.

The grenade slipped from Alfie's hand and bounced down the steep slope. The Muskies pressed their faces into the leaves. An explosion tore a hole in the ground, showering them with rocks and mud.

Peter yanked Onion around and slapped him hard. "Do you want us all to die?"

Frill had begun to back down the hillside, but Onion could still smell his name repeated over and over. *Onion. Orange. Little one, come home. Come home.*

Alfie raised the silvery-pink tube and twisted its base. The tube made a popping sound and recoiled. Blood sprayed into the air from Frill's upper side. Several of her legs vanished. Shouting with anguish, Onion struggled in Peter's grip. There was another pop, and more of Frill's legs and eyes and nosestalks disappeared. He could see blood now, *blood coming out,* spattering against the trees, pulsing onto the forest floor. Frill was still backing down the slope, but she was crippled now, and could neither roll nor flatten and undulate, and she was too big to take cover in the leafless forest.

Another pop from Alfie's tube. Onion wrenched free of Peter and jumped on Alfie again, stamped his foot hard on Alfie's back and yanked away the tube. Then he was racing down the slope. Yelling in pain, Alfie leapt after him, but tripped and crashed to the ground. Onion heard Peter's voice calling, and then Sara's wail. "Orange! Orange!"

Frill at last reached the shelter of the tank, and began to drag herself up the ramp, but she couldn't haul the trailing pieces of herself inside. Onion heaved them in for her, covering himself with blood and leaves and bits of her spongy flesh. Frill managed to grip the controls with her good legs, and then they were accelerating down the mountain, away from the Muskies.

An explosion vibrated through the floor. Onion glanced back through the tank wall. Two silver-pink tanks belonging to the Nest Guard whirled down the road toward the Muskies, but already the first tank smoked and wobbled unevenly.

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He did not look back after that, and tried not to think of Sara.

Frill's nestmates patched her up tenderly and planted buds to replace her missing extremities. *You should not have risked your life for an animal,* they said, *you foolish person, you strange person.*

But they also fussed over Onion, pulling off his filthy clothes, medicating all the scratches and bruises he had acquired. *You should be ashamed, little one. You nearly got your beloved mistress killed.*

Don't tell, Frill whispered. *Don't tell the Nest Guard what. They will take Onion. Don't tell.*

Hush, love, nestmate, sweet one. We will tell only if we have to.

They took the two of them home. Frill settled into the kitchen, drowsy from healing drugs. Onion followed her into the round purple house, so strange, so familiar, so hated and loved. The window closed behind him.

He wanted to do something for Frill. He wondered if he could cook for her, if he could work her kitchen implements without slicing himself to the bone this time. He wondered how long it would take her to grow new legs. She was so terribly disfigured.

You are so brave, little Orange, murmured Frill. *Are you all right? Did the wild beasts hurt you?*

But she did not say, *How wise you were to save my life.* She did not say, *You acted like a person. We will have to find a way for you to talk.*

Come here, little Onion, said Frill.

Onion walked over to her and leaned into her velvety warmth, which smelled more of healing salve at the moment than of lilacs. *You need a week of grooming,* she said, caressing him with a good leg. *Are you all right? Are you hungry?* She reached out and flicked open the cupboard. *Go on, little one, you look starved.*

Onion pulled out the whole vast pan of nut bread, and set it on the floor beside Frill's delicate whorl of a mouth. "Here," he said, though he knew she could not understand. And he broke off a handful and held it to her lips.

She bent several eyestalks to look at him. *No, little one,* she murmured. *I know you are tame, and want to be just like a person, but you're an animal. That's all you can ever be.*

Onion put down the hunk of bread, and crossed the floor to the window. Nothing happened when he placed his hand on it.

I told them to change the, Frill called drowsily from the kitchen. *I was so careless, your. You're too clever for your own good.*

The leaves had mostly fallen now, carpeting the muddy patch in Frill's driveway in orange and gold. Wind carried the last few into the sky. "I have to find Sara," Onion said desperately. "I have to go find them." In a burst of rage he pounded on the window until his hands began to bleed.

And then the rage drained away, leaving only exhaustion. He sat down heavily.

Neither his cleverness nor his rage would save Sara. If he wanted to help her, he would have to learn to be wise.

The sky darkened to indigo, and then black. Frill slumbered, eyes and nosestalks drooping. At last sleep overtook Onion, too, and he dreamed he was flying with the leaves through a starry night. He soared over the bones of the world, fold after fold of stark granite stretching to the horizon in all directions, but he did not know which way was home. ○

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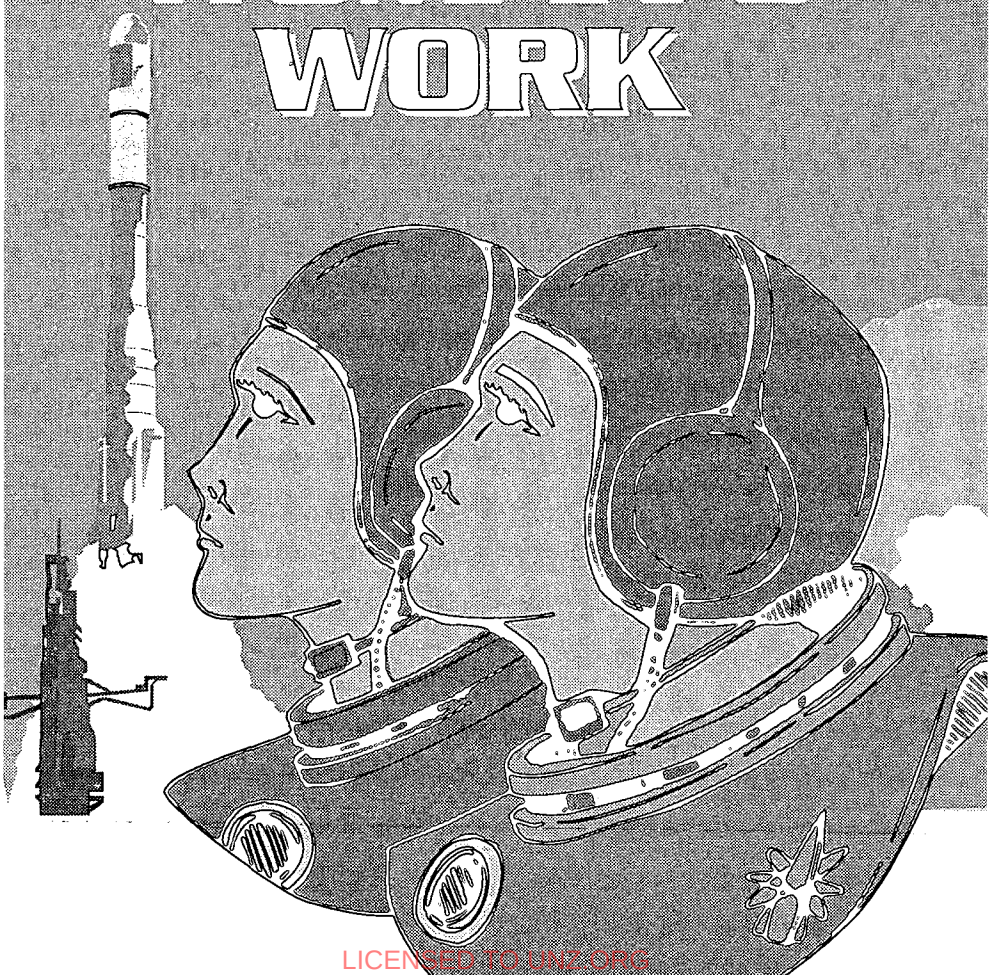
Tom Purdom

The author recommends one of his favorite feminist books, Sally Van Wagenen Keil's *Those Wonderful Women in their Flying Machines*—the story of the WASPS of World War II, to readers of this story. However improbable some might find his tale, Mr. Purdom partly wrote it because "an awful lot of women have been attracted to flying—a lot more than the famous ones, many more than most people realize." If history had evolved just a little bit differently, perhaps we wouldn't find ourselves so bemused by . . .

WOMAN'S WORK



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Maridell ran the backs of her fingers along Gary's cheek just before she left him at the door to the VIP visitors' room. Her breasts brushed against the front of his jacket.

"I'll be waiting downstairs," Maridell said. "I'll be here through the whole mission. Right up until Helen finishes her last debriefing."

Gary's son watched Maridell sway down the hall. Charlie was fifteen now. It wasn't hard to guess what he was thinking. Maridell was tall and curvy, and she covered her feelings with a seductive, continuously smiling southern female façade.

"It looks like you've got something going there," Charlie said.

"She's a plane nut," Gary said. "She tried to be a professional pilot, but her eyes weren't good enough. Then she tried engineering school and that didn't work out. So now she's here at the Cape saying bright things to astronauts' relatives. She says she's got a boyfriend in South Carolina, but I suspect that isn't going to last much longer."

"You sound like you've been exchanging life stories."

Gary shrugged. "This is the third time she's been on duty when I checked into the Family Liaison Office. The last time I got here an hour before your mother was supposed to get out of the simulator. So naturally the training staff decided that a storm had muddled up the primary landing point. Maridell and I sat in the visitors' gallery for five hours while your mother went through three extra orbits and some kind of extra-long approach to an alternate in the Indian Ocean."

Gary turned his head and watched Maridell step into the elevator. "She thinks it's *really wonderful* your mother has a husband who *really understands* the things *some people* feel when they look at an airplane."

Charlie frowned. "Are you worried, Dad?"

"Charlie—in just about one hour, your mother is going to be sitting on top of one hundred tons of liquid oxygen and kerosene. I think a certain amount of anxiety can't be considered unreasonable. Now let's go in there and do what we're supposed to do."

Helen was talking to her backup when Gary pushed open the door. They were both standing about three feet from the glass window that separated them from the VIP lounge. Helen was all suited up, completely covered in shiny silver-gray from the bottom of her chin down. The support crew would bolt on her helmet and start checking all her connections as soon as Gary and Charlie got out of their way.

Helen raised her hand and stopped Jenny Dalton in mid-sentence. She turned around and rested her palms on the window.

"I feel like I'm visiting somebody who's in prison," Charlie said. "It looks just like that, doesn't it?"

Gary smiled. "I think the decor's a little more civilized. I don't think the amenities in most prison visiting rooms include fresh roses on the TV."

The lounge itself was a stereotype of all the test-pilot ready rooms Gary had visited during the last eight years. It was basically utilitarian, but it had been warmed-up with a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, and furniture that underlined the private-library atmosphere. The oversize TV had been fitted into a pseudo-walnut cabinet. The vase that contained the roses was made out of plastic but it had been selected by someone who appreciated slender, elegant lines.

On the TV screen, the camera was panning across the bleachers that held the Japanese delegation. The volume control had been set at a subconversational murmur.

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"It is now T minus one hour and fifty-five minutes," Mission Support was saying. "We are forty-five minutes from the final pilot insertion procedures for America's first attempt at full orbital flight. Astronaut Lane will be devoting the next ten minutes to a private interview with her family."

"You're really skewing the ratings, Mom," Charlie said. "They're claiming half the Fourth of July parades in the country are marching around without audiences."

Helen smiled—the big, high-hearted smile the American public had been responding to for the last eighteen months. It had been seventeen years since Gary had stood beside an airplane, exchanging nervous comments with five other skydiving students, and received his first look at that smile. Helen had been striding across the macadam with her helmet tucked under her arm, and he had immediately decided the world had just presented him with his first experience of absolute certainty: he might kill himself jumping out of the airplane, but he wasn't going to die because the pilot had goofed up.

"It's a good thing we aren't doing this next year," Jenny Dalton drawled. "I'd hate to think we spoiled all the hoopla they've got planned for the Bicentennial."

Anyone who looked at Helen and Jenny could have guessed they had both been through the same selection process. They were both five-nine. They both had the trim, vigilant bodies of people who kept themselves in shape. They were both forty-one. Jenny had skipped "the child-rearing bit" but that seemed to be the only significant difference in a life-pattern that had included college, ten years of general aviation flying, marriage to an engineering-school academic, and a steady progression toward the moment when they stepped into an experimental aircraft and made their first flight as qualified test pilots.

Gary placed his hand on the window, directly over Helen's, so their palms would have been touching if the glass hadn't come between them. Helen raised an eyebrow and they exchanged wry looks. It had been three weeks since the last time he had touched her. It had been six weeks since the last time she had looked up at him as they brought their bodies together.

This was a new experience for both of them. In the past, they had just exchanged a standard after-breakfast hug and peck as they had hurried off to their day's work. He had never visited an airfield when his wife was actually working with an experimental plane.

"I've talked to the boss," Helen said. "They've agreed you can both join the sendoff line if you want to. You'll have to watch the launch from downstairs, on the screen. They claim they can't get you to the bleachers in time if you're still here when I get in the truck."

"Is that what you want, babe?"

"It would be nice. You won't get to hear the big roar, of course."

Charlie slipped into his mock-gung-ho mode and gave his mother a big thumbs up. "We didn't come here to hear the roar, Mom. We came to see you."

Helen smiled. "I'll make sure none of the engineers on this project hear you said that."

"You're the one that's sitting on the rocket, Mom."

"It'll be a pleasure just to be somewhere where there's a limit on the number of newsies you have to deal with," Gary said. "If one more idiot sticks a

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mike in my face and asks me *how it feels* to know my wife is about to become the first American to orbit the Earth. . . ."

Jenny Dalton had turned away from them. She had focused her attention on the TV on the astronauts' side of the window, but Gary could see her smiling.

"That's all they ever want to know," Gary said. "How does it feel? They'd probably wire us up and broadcast our emotions if they could figure out some way to do it."

"It's easier on this side of the fence," Helen said. "I do my press conferences and go back to the training schedule."

"We've been watching every press conference," Charlie said. "You've been handling them like a pro."

"You're on now yourself, Gary," Jenny Dalton said.

Gary turned his head and saw his own face filling the screen. It was the interview he had taped for NBC. Naturally, they had picked his standard response to the other standard question—his affirmation that of course he worried, it wouldn't be human not to worry, but he wanted Helen to do what she wanted to do with her life, and he only regretted that the Japanese Empire had gotten ahead of us once again, and Helen would have to be the second human into orbit, not the first.

"I say the same thing every time," Gary said. "You'd think they'd just tape one answer and keep it in stock."

"You have to say it to each interviewer," Charlie said. "They don't believe it's official until you say it to *them*."

Helen patted the glass over Gary's hand. "It's a good answer, honey. I get a little weepy every time I hear it."

Gary covered his emotions by glancing at the TV. They were skirting the edges of the Forbidden Subject. It was just a little speck somewhere on the horizon, but any sight of it was a warning that it was time to change course.

There was an obvious answer to the "aren't you worried" question. *Listen, jerk, I went to three test-pilot funerals over the last ten years. Two of them involved high-spirited, sexually attractive women—just like my wife—who would have been covered with burn scars over eighty percent of their bodies if they had lived. Every day, for all the years she was flying experimental planes, my wife went off to work and I went off to teach my classes knowing something like that could happen to her. At least now I can sit in front of the TV and know exactly what's happening.*

You never said that, of course. They wouldn't have understood it if you had. They all thought your wife had started doing something dangerous when the government started putting test pilots on top of rockets.

Charlie had already picked up the signals and realized it was time to change the subject. "I still get angry every time anybody mentions the Japs. You could have been doing this fourteen months ago if those airheads in Washington had pulled themselves together."

Helen shrugged. "We're doing it, Charlie. That's the main thing. Ten years from now it isn't going to matter to anyone who went first or who went second. The only thing that will matter is that we're there."

Jenny switched off the TV and turned her back on them. "You've got one minute, Helen."

Charlie stepped up to the window and put his palm over Helen's other hand. "Have fun, Mom."

Gary patted the glass and gave her a thumbs up sign. Should he wish her

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luck? Wasn't there some superstition about that? Or did that just apply to the theater?

There was a moment when he thought her eyes looked a little misty. Then she stepped back and raised both her thumbs. She swung away from them and she and Jenny hurried toward the door to the suiting-up room.

"Make yourself comfortable," Jenny said. "We'll send somebody around to take you downstairs. It should be about ten minutes."

Charlie stared at his mother until the door closed behind her. He lowered his head and Gary patted his shoulder.

"You did okay," Gary said.

"So did you, Dad."

"I have to tell you—it's getting harder."

"She'll do fine. You know she'll do fine."

"I think I'd like to take one of those roses and hand it to her when she goes past the line. Do you think that would look all right?"

"Could she take it?"

"Jenny could take it for her. She'll be right behind her."

"Go ahead and do it. She'll love it."

"You think so?"

"She's my mother, Dad."

Gary crept into the motel room a little after eight-thirty. He had made it through the cigars and the champagne showers, but Charlie could manage the rest of the partying by himself. He had started feeling tired as soon as he had looked up at the big screen in Mission Support and seen Helen stepping onto the deck of the carrier.

Helen was still in debriefing. It would be three more days before they got an evening to themselves. After that she'd probably be rushing around for at least a month. The President had already announced that she was supposed to make a joint speech to Congress. New York was scheduling a parade.

Somehow it was always six weeks. The OB had told Helen they should wait six weeks after Charlie had been born. Gary's leg had been imprisoned in a cast for six weeks the time he had broken it skiing.

He fell asleep in front of the TV in the middle of an interview with Annie Brown. His glass fell out of his hand and his brain steadfastly ignored the sensations radiating from the ice melting on his thigh.

"It's only been sixty-two years since that first flight in 1913," the CBS interviewer was saying. "It's only been thirty-eight years since you made your epic first solo flight across the Atlantic. And now we seem to be witnessing the birth of a Space Age heroine who's going to have the same kind of impact. Did you ever think we'd get this far so soon?"

Annie Brown had been noted for her shyness and reserve in the weeks that had followed her own first contact with fame. She had started hiring coaches and consultants when she had realized she was going to be a public figure for the rest of her life. She had eventually blossomed into a celebrity who was totally at ease with the news media and the public attention she attracted.

"Actually, I'm not that surprised," Annie Brown said. "I've often wondered what might have happened if we had gotten into the air even sooner. I've always felt we could have, in fact. If things had gone just a little differently, somebody might have developed a successful powered airplane at least ten years before the Callaghans did it."

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The interviewer put on his best imitation of an interested listener. In another sixty seconds, he decided, he would switch to a black and white newsreel of Annie Brown's ticker tape parade and follow it with a replay of Helen Lane stepping onto the deck of the carrier. He had played the carrier scene five times in the last ninety minutes, but the network seemed to feel it had to fill every time slot with an item related to America's First Orbital Flight.

"I take it you're one of those people who believe there's no limit on the number of people who could have produced important inventions."

"Oh, I think there's a limit, all right. When people claim someone else would have invented the airplane or the telephone if the real inventor hadn't done it, they forget something—it would have been somebody a lot like the person who actually did it. If Einstein hadn't worked out the theory of relativity in 1903, somebody else would have done it sooner or later—but it would have been someone *like Einstein.* Someone with Einstein's brains. And some of Einstein's personality traits."

"The Callaghans were a little odd, weren't they? From what I've heard, Annie, it might be hard to find two other people who shared some of their personality quirks."

"The Callaghans developed a successful heavier-than-air flying machine—when a lot of other people failed—because they were a natural team. Most of the people who took up the challenge before them were loners. But we now know it takes a team to develop a new plane. The Callaghans were their own mechanics, their own aeronautical engineers, their own test-pilots. They even built their own wind-tunnels and repeated some of the wind-tunnel experiments a pair of brothers called Orville and Wilbur Wright carried out ten years earlier. Nobody remembers the Wrights nowadays, but they had the same quality the Callaghans had—they were two loners who could work together just because they were siblings. I've always felt there's a real possibility that the first airplane might have taken to the air a full ten years earlier if Wilbur hadn't cut himself and died from an infection two years after they started experimenting with gliders."

"That's an interesting thought, Annie. If penicillin had been invented forty years earlier, according to what you're suggesting, we could have been sitting here talking about the Wright *brothers* instead of the Callaghan *sisters.*"

"The airplane could have played an important role in the Great War if it had been invented ten years earlier. Military aviation might have had more impact on the first decades of the Japanese-American rivalry. Who knows how different things would be today?" O

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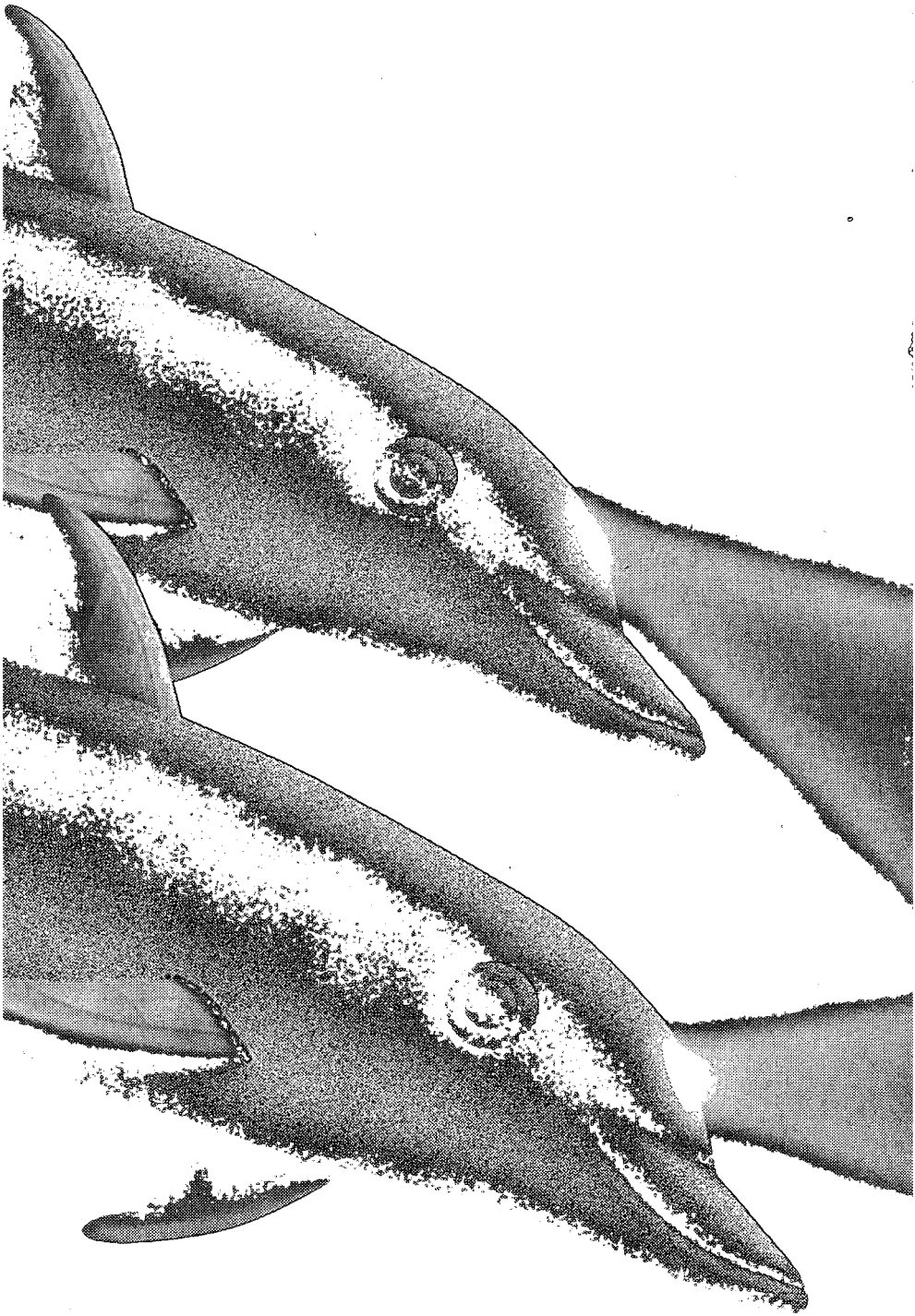

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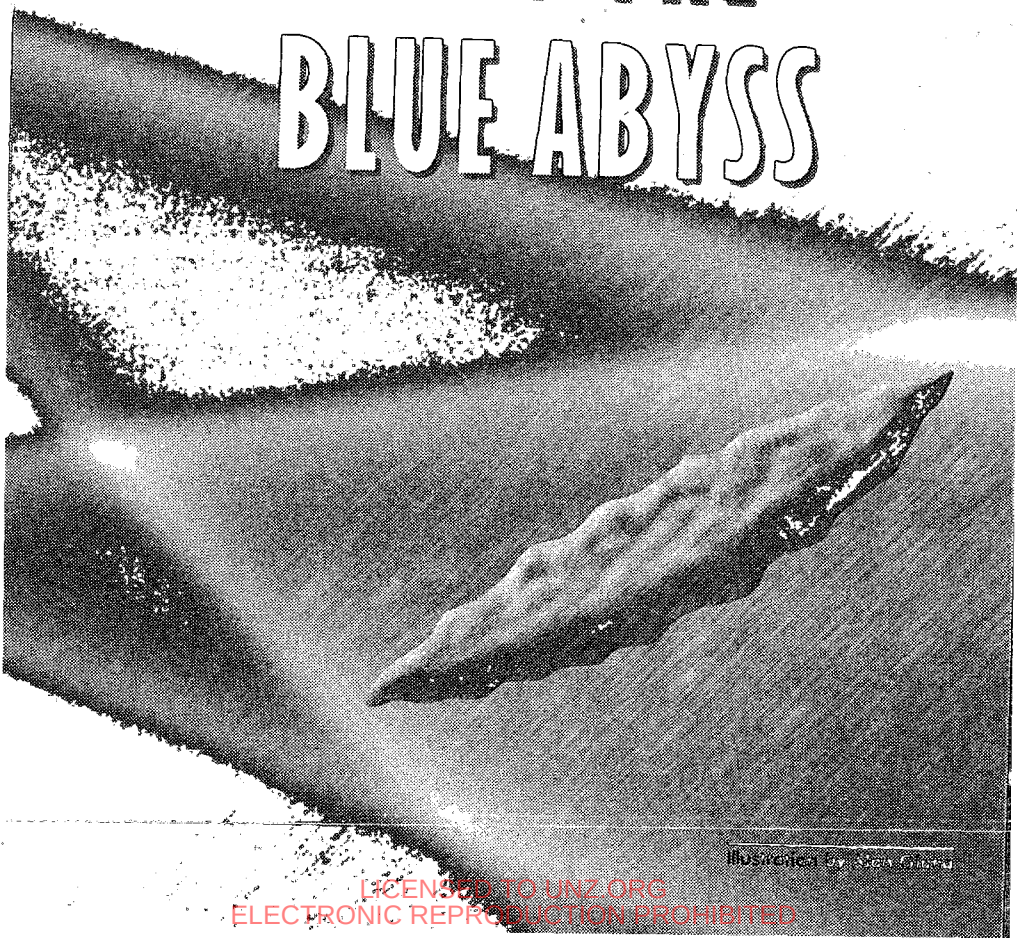
Geoffrey A. Landis

Geoffrey A. Landis had a joyous spring. A week after his marriage to SF poet Mary Turzillo, he was a Nebula finalist for best novella and for best short story—with "Winter Fire" (*Asimov's*, August 1997). Our latest tale from Mr. Landis appears to be the first we've ever published that focuses on the planet Uranus. Prepare yourself for an exhilarating dive . . .

INTO THE BLUE ABYSS



Illustrated by Stan Drake

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There is nothing quite like the color of a hydrogen atmosphere tinted with methane. Deeper than sapphire; milkier than turquoise, Uranus was an indescribable luminous hue. Over the weeks, it had swollen from a dim, watery speck to the featureless blue pearl that hung below us.

Supported by an invisible microwave beam, the base station lowered into the edge of the stratosphere, and the moment came.

Wrapped in a cocoon of diamond and steel, safe within our technology, we readied ourselves to drop.

"Two questions," I had said. "Why Uranus? And why me?"

God, who would ever go to Uranus? Way out in the big dark, nearly as far beyond Saturn as Saturn is from the sun. It is cold and dark and, for the most part, uninteresting.

Stodderman was a thin man, neatly dressed, intense; a natural team leader. Some women would have found him sexy, I think. I was not one of them.

We had been in the common lounge of an orbital habitat with the improbable name of Wat Benchamabopit. That suited me; I hadn't wanted to go down to Earth quite yet anyway. I had unfinished business there which I was not quite ready to face.

The Wat Benchamabopit habitat had been chosen as a pragmatic place to meet: it was in an eccentric trans-lagrangian orbit that placed it at an energy convenient for both of us to rendezvous. Like many orbital habs, it rented out a common area for the use of transients. The recycled air odor was covered over with the faint scent of some flowery fragrance, perhaps incense. Entry to the main part of the habitat was through the wide-open mouth of a blue-faced demon, elaborately carved with huge bulging eyes and protruding tusks. The symbolism seemed, to me, to be ominous.

Stodderman chose his words carefully. "The ice moons of the outer solar system are beginning to attract some attention. You know that there's a lot of prospecting going on right now. Uranus is far from the commercial belt, but there are people who think that the moons may be valuable soon."

"I've heard the rumors," I told him. "But you weren't talking about the moons, you were talking about the planet itself. Cut to the data-dump. Uranus? Why?"

"One of the prospectors. An old coot, a miner. The kind with wild hair and huge eyes and UV-hardened skin, been alone a little too long with only her p-buggy and computer for company. Those outer-moon prospectors are all half-crazy, Dr. Hamakawa."

"Leah," I said. "Please. Go on."

"Leah. Right," he said. "The prospectors. They've got tools, you know, some pretty good prospecting tools, and they've got a lot of free time. So, this one had a hobby: she took to sending some of her prospecting probes out, instead of down. Looking at Uranus from orbit. Something she saw got us interested. Down in the atmosphere. Deep down. We seem to be seeing some, ah, call it disequilibrium chemistry."

"Disequilibrium chemistry," I said. "You mean, life? You're saying that there's life on *Uranus?*"

"Call it, possible indications of organic molecules of unknown origin," Stodderman said. "Hydrocarbons and so forth. We'd prefer not to suggest anything about life right now. You're too young, I expect, but I remember the Zeus expedition."

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The Zeus expedition had been an expedition to Jupiter's moon Europa. It had been an enormous, extravagant mission, as expensive as an interstellar probe. The expedition leaders had publicly vowed that they would return with proof that there was life in the oceans below Europa's icy crust.

Two hundred people, in habitats magnetically shielded from the deadly radiation of Jupiter's belts, had landed on the shattered ice-plains of Europa and bored with a fusion drill twenty kilometers through the ice to the secret ocean beneath. They brought arc-lights to depths that had not seen sunlight in a hundred million years, and explored the fantastic seascapes with submarines, bottom-crawlers, sub-surface drillers, and telerobotic probes. They found wispy structures of precipitated limestone, pale and fragile and intricate as a lace curtain, extending for hundreds of kilometers. They found strange chemistry, undersea volcanoes, a fascinating system of global oceanic currents driven by tidal stretching—but they found no life: no hydrothermal-vent communities, no bacteria, not even pre-biotic molecules.

The Zeus mission had scouted and cataloged the resources of Europa. The infrastructure that Zeus set up had opened up the moon to human habitation. Europa was now the largest human settlement in the Jupiter system, and the largest of the Europan cities was Zeus, honoring not the god, but the mission. But in the public mind, the Zeus mission was still a synonym for an expensive failure.

The solar system, except for the Earth, was dead. From the sulfur ice-caps of Mercury to the fairy-castle frost of Charon, a hundred expeditions had searched for life, and had failed to find it. No one except the crazies and the fanatics looked any more.

"That's why we're keeping this low key," he said.

The first Uranus expeditions had looked for life, of course. Humans had not explored the planet itself in person—that idea was crazy—but Uranus had been investigated with robotic probes that floated on hot-air (or rather, hot-hydrogen) balloons in the cloud layers. That was the obvious place to look for life; up where there was still sunlight, where the pressure was only one or two atmospheres.

"Nobody has looked down deep," Stodderman said. "The atmosphere is fifteen hundred kilometers thick. They only looked at the very top."

"It seems terribly unlikely," I said. "Where's the energy?" Life is a solar-driven heat engine—regardless of how strange life might be, it would need energy. "Does any sunlight penetrate the atmosphere?"

"No," he said. "There's not much sunlight even above the clouds. Below? Nothing. Where the oceans are, it's dark."

"So what drives the life? Heat from the interior?"

Stodderman shook his head. "No. Turns out Uranus is odd—it's the only one of the gas giants that has no detectable heat coming out of its interior."

"Then, what?"

"That's what we're looking to find out."

"Fair enough," I said. "And my second question? Why me?"

"Several reasons," he said. "One is that we're looking for somebody with skill as a submersible pilot."

As a student, I had worked for a fish farm. We corralled the fish with submersible vehicles, mechanical fish piloted by a virtual reality link. A school of fish doesn't have a leader—its motion is a perfect example of a self-organizing chaotic system—but with a computer providing real-time feedback, a single mechanical Judas fish could subtly influence the motion of a school

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and, over time, lead it anywhere. I had gotten to be quite good at it. It was a popular job for university students, something that could be done from a dormitory, where I was a student anonymous among ten thousand others. I had never needed to be within a thousand kilometers of the ocean.

I nodded. "Okay. So, out of maybe fifty million people who had jobs as fish-pushers in college, why do you want me? I'm a physicist. Seems to me that you want a biologist."

"Oh, we have a biologist on the mission, of course. But what attracted us was the fact that, although you're a physicist now, you have some background in biochemistry as well."

"That was years ago."

"No matter. You seem to dabble in many subjects, and you're not afraid to stick your neck out and speculate a little. We're going to dive into an ocean where the pressure is well over fifty thousand atmospheres. It's a realm that's never been explored; we have no idea what we might find. We thought a physicist might be a good thing to have along."

I nodded.

The reward that he hadn't bothered to state aloud was a tempting one.

I was not a member of an institute, but a freelancer, a mercenary scientist, desperate to get in an institute—but not willing to sell my freedom for it. If I went on the expedition, and if we were to find life, I could return not merely an associate, but a full fellow of any one of the great institutes. That would give me my freedom.

But that didn't matter. I had been hooked before he said a single word. There was no way they could keep me off this expedition.

Uranus! I was on my way.

Stodderman had put together his expedition on a budget of hopes, promises, and the discarded oxygen canisters and recycled detritus of earlier missions. He had hired transport to Uranus on the fusion-powered transfer ship *Astrid* that brought supplies to the prospector's camp on Oberon. He had arranged the use of the fusion motor on *Astrid,* and on a second freighter, *Norge,* for a full week after our arrival.

The expedition base station hung from a hundred-kilometer-long tether, dangling into the fringes of the stratosphere below a V-shaped sail made of thin metallic mesh. Thousands of kilometers away, in a stationary orbit, two fusion-powered masers generated beams of microwaves that reflected off the sail, producing the upward force that held the base station up, lowering us slowly. At the lowest point, barely dipping into the fringes of atmosphere, the base station would drop the two exploration pods into the depths.

The maser idea had seemed crazy to me, and I'd told him so. Why not descend with rockets? Or balloon in the atmosphere?

Stodderman shrugged. "We looked at that. The balloon would have to be enormous. The atmosphere is mostly hydrogen, so a balloon doesn't have much lifting power."

"But on Venus they have whole cities floating in the clouds."

"On Venus they don't drop the cities down a gravity well, float them for a while, then try to launch them back out. The gravity is less than Earth's, but the well is twice as deep.

"Turns out our way is simpler. The ships are here anyway; *Norge* isn't heading back for weeks, and *Astrid* is staying even longer. Twenty kilome-

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ters per second into the gravity well, and another twenty out again, that's a killer task even for a fusion rocket. But it's not hard to reconfigure fusion engines to make a maser. And a mesh sail weighs almost nothing; it's like lowering a spiderweb down. It sounds complex, but really it's the low-cost solution."

"Doesn't sound complex; it sounds risky," I said. "What if the maser fails when you're lowering the station? Or when you're hovering for the drop-off?"

"If the maser fails, we all get to see the oceans of Uranus first-hand," Stodderman said. "We'd better hope like hell that the crew on the ships are working to restart it. In two, maybe three minutes, we hit the atmosphere hard enough to pick up frictional heat. About six minutes, give or take, the base station is moving so fast that even if the maser could reacquire the sail, we can't accelerate fast enough to pull out. In eight minutes, the sail hits the atmosphere."

"And then?" I asked.

Stodderman shrugged. "It's a toss-up. Either the atmospheric pressure crushes us, the tether melts, or the mesh sail hits the atmosphere and disintegrates. I don't think anybody is taking odds." He looked at me. "This bother you?"

"No," I said. "I don't understand much about people. But I do know one thing. People die."

Of the five of us in the expedition, two of us were to descend through the atmosphere into the Uranian ocean. Over the eight weeks spent on *Astrid* in transit to Uranus, we had trained on the use of the Uranus hydrosphere mobility pods in the simulator. We crawled into it in a fetal position, bodies slick with transceiver gel, wearing neural pickup gloves and skinsuit. In the actual vehicles, we would be intubated for oxygen and liquids, but in the simulator, this final step was skipped.

Hanita Jayavel and I were the most adept at the intricate set of skills required in piloting the pods. To call the skill "piloting" was to understate the task; the mobility pods fit around us like a second body, a body with a diamond shell, steel muscles and electronic senses that taste the chemicals in the water and see sonar echoes.

Exploring the oceans of Uranus in person, and not by telepresence, was crazy. The expedition pods were the reason that it was possible at all.

The two pods had been specially designed for Uranus' ocean, and were the most expensive objects on the expedition. Tiny, self-contained submarines with full life-support systems and independent power, they had an ovoid pressure vessel, grown from diamond fiber, to protect us from the enormous pressures beneath the Uranian atmosphere. Around the pressure capsule, the body had been designed on the model of a dolphin, with dolphin's flexibility to its steel fins and tail. Attached to the diamond bodies were a thermophotovoltaic isotope power supply and canisters filled with chemicals that, when our mission was over, would generate the hot gas that would fill the buoyancy floats to bring us to the surface. From the surface, balloons would inflate to bring us into the Uranian stratosphere, where we could ignite solid rocket motors to hop back to the hovering base station. The pod also had a sample acquisition arm, slender and jointed, which retracted fully into the body.

* * *

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Over the long transit, Hanita and I had talked for a long time, and she told me of her life.

Hanita Jayavel had been the daughter of a Kuiper habitat. I had known little about the fringe habitats that were scattered deep out in the far dark, only that they were inhabited by antisocial fanatics and isolationist religious factions; they were unimportant to the politics and economics of the inner solar system. Hanita's birth habitat had been a communistic one. They lived on an icy body in the Kuiper belt, a body with plentiful water and nitrogenous volatiles, and, most important, one that was far from everybody else. Their economic system was to share and share alike, and their credo that nobody in the habitat was any better than anybody else. There were other colonies in the Kuiper diaspora, a thousand groups seeking to distance themselves from the crush of humanity, but with a hundred million kilometers between outposts, commerce between them was slight.

And then the fusion renaissance expanded outward. It swallowed the Kuiper diaspora without even a gulp, destroyed them not by war, but by a surfeit of riches. The children of the commune saw the wealth that the robber barons brought. They had been taught that the robber barons were evil, but what they saw was the robber barons financing institutes, art, science. The laws of Hanita's habitat had not been restrictive; they were proud to allow their inhabitants to leave freely, and, free, their children had drifted away.

Hanita's family had been one of the last to leave, when the settlement had lost so many of the younger generation that it had become clear that there would be too few to sustain it. More of an immigrant than a refugee, Hanita had studied chemistry in one of the inner belt communities, and joined on to the expedition as much for her background in the outer solar system as for her expertise in chemistry.

After three weeks of the mental and physical exhaustion of training together, Hanita had confided in me further. Unknown to Stodderman, she had a personal reason for joining the expedition, a secret reason for her fierce dedication to mastering the piloting simulation. She was making certain that she would be one of the two chosen to dive into the unknown ocean.

Hanita Jayavel wanted to reinvent paradise.

Uranus is four times the diameter of the Earth, but the density of the planet is so low that the surface gravity is actually slightly lower than Earth's. Above the clouds, the temperature is frigid—seventy degrees Kelvin, cold enough to freeze oxygen. Down below the cloud tops, though, the temperature rises. It rises only slowly, because the interior of Uranus produces almost no heat. At the ocean, it was calculated that the temperature was moderate, in the range of three to four hundred Kelvin: the range required for human biochemistry.

The search for life motivated Stodderman, but did not excite Hanita. As a chemist, she had long ago concluded that in the absence of either sunlight or interior heat there was no entropy gradient for life to exploit.

In the warm dark ocean, Hanita Jayavel wanted to make a new colony of humans. Hidden a thousand kilometers under the opaque atmosphere of Uranus, she would set a secret colony far from the numerous habitations of humankind. A colony free of the economics of the solar system.

Humans don't need sunlight; the Kuiper colonies in the cold dark had proved that. With an infinite supply of hydrogen and deuterium from the

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ocean waters, with helium-three from the atmosphere, humans could create their own sun. The oceans of Uranus had everything needed, except life.

She would bring that.

She explained her plans to me, showing me how she would modify the human genome to make oceanic life. She drew a fantastic picture of life in a three-dimensional ocean, spreading out across a world with a surface area sixty times larger than the land area of the Earth. To her, the expedition into Uranus' oceans was not a search for life—it was a scouting trip.

Hanita was a fanatic, I realized, and, when I told her so, she admitted it. I will stop at nothing, she said.

"Even killing?" I asked.

"Without hesitation," she said.

Okay. I could live with that.

Inwardly, I agreed with Hanita; with no plausible source of energy, we were unlikely to find life. For me, curiosity alone was sufficient reason to drop into the seas of Uranus.

But I, too, had motivations that I kept to myself.

In the inner solar system my life had been becoming complicated. I was not sure how to deal with romance. I didn't know what to think. I had never learned how to love. Was this love, what I felt? Would I even know it?

And yet, though I had made no encouragement at all, he wanted me.

The meat was nothing to me. People died. There was no point in getting close to them; they die and leave you alone. This was what I knew.

In some vague, abstract way, I wondered if I was even capable of this thing, love, that others find so all important. Probably not. But if I were, if I were a whole person, if I'd never experienced what I had experienced, in the camps, in the war, I would not be the same person. Perhaps growing up as a child of the war had burned something out of me, something that others thought precious, but it also had forged me and shaped me into the person I now was. This was the price I had paid, for being what I was. And the price was cheap.

The situation was too complicated for me. Uranus was conveniently far away from Earth. A mission to Uranus uncomplicated my life.

As for basic facts about Uranus—before the expedition, I had known little more than the dumb jokes ("Hey, there are rings of dirt around Uranus!"). It's true: the rings of Uranus are unlike Saturn's gleaming particles of ice; they are dark, the color of coal. Rings of dirt. What else was there to know about Uranus, other than that it was cold and dark? An oddball among the planets, it orbits on its side, with the north pole pointing sunward for half of its eighty-four-year orbit, the south pole sunward for the other half.

Below the clouds, way below, was an ocean of liquid water. Uranus was the true water-world of the solar system, a sphere of water surrounded by a thick atmosphere. Unlike the other planets, Uranus has a rocky core too small to measure, or perhaps no solid core at all, but only ocean, an ocean that has actually dissolved the silicate core of the planet away, a bottomless ocean of liquid water twenty thousand kilometers deep.

The microwave jockeys tweaked their masers, and inch by inch lowered us down the gravity well. There were four of us in the station; Hanita and I to pilot the pods, Stodderman as the expedition leader, and our technician

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Kamishinay. Kamishinay was a spindly guy from a zero-grav habitat, limbs as thin as chopsticks with small hard muscles protruding like walnuts. He was quiet, but superb with equipment.

At last the expedition base station hung in the most tenuous wisps of the Uranian atmosphere. The base station was smaller even than the quarters on the *Astrid,* barely large enough for the control center and the two exploration pods docked in their slings. It smelled of metal and oil and the acetic-acid odor of outgassing silicone seals. After the rancid sweat and the organic smell of the recirculated air in the transfer ship's cabins, the new-equipment smells of the station were welcome. We worked elbow to elbow, getting ready. Hanita and I stripped, and our technician Kamishinay assisted in pasting sensor electrodes over our bodies, checking each one as it was placed, adjusting it minutely for the best pick-up of muscular signals. Unexpectedly, although he had just run his hands over nearly every square decimeter of our naked bodies, Kamishinay was squeamish about inserting our catheters, and so I lubricated the tube and inserted it for Hanita as he averted his eyes, and then spread my legs and held myself rigid to let her reciprocate for me. Despite the grease, the catheter stung like a rasp as it slid in. Finally, with Kamishinay again helping, we inserted the intravenous monitors—another sharp sting—and nasal tubes, until both of us seemed to be cybernetic organisms as much as biological.

Through this all, Stodderman had been ignoring us, concentrating on details of piloting and reading the external sensors for clues to the environment below. To him, we had become little more than two pieces of the mission's equipment. His intensity was reserved for his machines.

The Uranus exploration pods were tiny, and slithering inside was a tough proposition requiring a liberal application of gel. Once inside, in the tight dark, with the sense-net hugging your body closer than a lover, the bile taste of the tongue control and the scratching, choking itch of the tubes down your throat, it felt like some medieval torture—until the system was energized.

With the power on, your senses came alive, the diamond shell became your skin, the sonar senses your second eyes, the chemical sensors your smell and taste and touch, a thousand times more sensitive than the crude chemical instruments that humans call their senses. The fins flexed to our slightest touch. Mechanical dolphins, we squirmed and fidgeted, itching for release from the docking harness that held us.

The moment came. Our systems had been tested, the tests checked, the checks rechecked and verified, and the verification checked. We were ready.

First Hanita, and then it was my turn: we were jettisoned from the expedition base station, and fell—plummeted—into the pearly blueness of Uranus.

We dove into the infinite abyss.

An unmanned probe, operated by telepresence, would have been less crazy, but that solution turned out to be unworkable. Under the enormous pressure of the hydrogen atmosphere, hydrogen atoms are forced into solution, and dissociate into ions. This made the water conductive enough to block electromagnetic transmissions. If we wanted to know what lay below the surface of the ocean, we had to explore it in person.

Even further down, the pressure becomes so high that the water itself became liquid metal. Slow currents flowing in the water gave Uranus its magnetic field. But that was farther than we would ever go. To explore the upper ocean would be enough for any one expedition.

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Above us, the base station, lightened by the loss of the exploration pods, rose on its microwave wings back into orbit.

We fell, shrieking, down through the hydrogen atmosphere.

At the edge of the atmosphere, the sunlight was like a late afternoon, not noticeably dim, Uranus a huge blue ocean below us.

The blue slowly deepened from sapphire into cobalt into the deepest shade of midnight.

The atmosphere thickened. In the stratosphere, there were winds of a thousand kilometers per hour; but here below the clouds, the atmosphere was still. If there were any winds at all, they were below the level of detectability.

Down, into the deeper blue. Dark blue. Pastel, then ink.

Down.

We fell through clouds: first methane clouds, then ammonia clouds, then ammonium hydrosulfide, and into the darkness. Oddly, we didn't even need parachutes. As the atmosphere thickened, by slow degrees our fall slackened. We fell for hours; a thousand kilometers, and continued to fall. We were falling in utter darkness now, and incrementally the atmosphere had become so dense that our fall slowed to a crawl.

And, in the darkness, below a thousand kilometers of atmosphere, as slowly as an ant falling through the thick air, we splashed in slow motion into the ocean.

We were now buoyant: no longer falling, we were swimming. Sweeping across the darkness, our spotlights saw only a waveless obsidian surface; our sonar saw nothing at all but its own reflection. Only the taste had changed, from methane-laced hydrogen into water.

We were fishes in the Uranian sea.

But the tantalizing hints of disequilibrium chemistry that had drawn us across the vast darkness and down through the clouds had not been here at the surface. We swam, making measurements, taking the measure of our diamond and steel bodies, checking the systems that had been checked a thousand times before, leaving wakes across the waveless sea.

And then we dove.

The ocean was the temperature of blood. Encased inside mechanical dolphins, we swam in the dark. I chased Hanita, laughing, and tagged her; then she turned and chased me, and then together we dove deeper into the darkness of the Uranian sea.

I had left myself behind.

We tasted the water, we heard the sounds. Sound? We reconfigured, boosting the amplification on our electronic ears. Sonar showed nothing there, but something was making a chirruping, faint but (to our amplified ears) quite clear. A sound oddly like the serenade of spring peepers. We turned our floodlights on to the brightest setting, but they showed nothing, only water. There was no discernible directionality to the sound, and nothing there to see.

Deeper.

There were no currents in this sunless sea, or if there were currents, they were so sluggish that we could not detect them. No bubbles, no form to the water. It was so clear and dark that we had almost no sense of immersion;

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it was as if instead of diving we were hanging motionless, suspended in nothing.

And then, as we dove—a kilometer below the surface, by my pressure gauge—suddenly there was something in our lights. A layer, as thin as a soap bubble, iridescent in the glow of our floodlights, giving a visible surface to the formless deep. It undulated sluggishly. We penetrated through it, and it offered no barrier to our passage. Slow oily ripples spread out from the area of penetration, pieces breaking off and floating free, oscillating in shape, dancing like tiny butterflies in a way that was almost lascivious. A layer of thin, oily scum.

Organics. Biological in origin? Maybe. But what could be the energy source? We had been measuring thermal lapse as we penetrated deeper, and we had found only a minuscule heat flow, just enough to keep the oceans from freezing. There was no trace of free thermal energy. Where there was no free energy, there could be no life.

I schooled myself not to be excited, so I would not be disappointed. I hadn't want to be a fellow anyway.

Hanita's chemical analysis showed the scum to be tangled chain molecules; hydrocarbon, primarily, with small amounts of nitrogen and traces of sulfur. "Not really biological," she informed me, "but in some ways similar to biological chemistry. You might call it pre-biotic molecules. Primordial slime." The organic slime from which, on Earth, life had arisen.

Despite the lack of an identifiable energy source, the organic molecules were slowly replicating, but they assembled nothing of interest: no cells, no complicated structure, just endless copies of hydrocarbon ooze. Was ooze life? I didn't want to be a fellow, all it would give me was freedom, and I didn't need or care about freedom.

The molecules catalyze their own formation, Hanita reported. Out of dissolved methane, hydrogen sulfide, and ammonia, they formed molecules that serve as catalysts to form more of themselves. Was this life? Perhaps by the simplest definitions—it replicated—but with no structure, with no metabolism, it would hardly serve to excite those above.

Meanwhile, I had been trying to analyze the sound. My working hypothesis was that the sound was meteorological in origin. The vortices of storms hundreds of kilometers overhead were filtered by the layers of atmosphere, turning noise into eerie music. It was odd, but no odder than stratospheric whistlers.

Then a fish swept by us. It was huge. It was a filter-feeder, grazing on the hydrocarbon layer.

It was singing.

The fish was wide and flat and thin, an irregularly shaped pancake. It moved slowly, creeping along at the pace of a carpet of ants. It had no sense organs that we could detect, no eyes, no sonar.

It didn't mind our floodlights; why should it? How could it have evolved photosensitivity, a thousand kilometers below any possible trace of sunlight? We circled it, photographing, documenting the fish in the Uranian ocean. This changed everything.

It was perhaps the ugliest fish ever, a lumpy grey tortilla, undulating languidly as it munched its way across the oily slime. Our sonar showed—nothing. It was the same density, apparently the same composition as the scum that it ate.

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This changed more than just the way the solar system would view our expedition, I realized. Hanita wanted to recreate her childhood paradise in the oceans of Uranus, but this could only be possible if humanity ignored Uranus. Uranus wouldn't be ignored if life was reported.

But if Stodderman's mission reported nothing, no one would ever return to Uranus, not soon, not perhaps for hundreds of years. Long enough for a colony to flourish.

Under conductive ocean, we weren't able to report our results. No one would know what we found until we surfaced. There was only one solution: *Hanita must try to kill me before we reached the surface.*

I was suddenly aware of my body, cramped into fetal position, packed in gel and penetrated by tubes, unable to do more than twitch, separated from crushing pressure by only a thin eggshell of diamond filament. We had been training on the mobility pods for weeks; we both knew hundreds of things that could go wrong, weak points that could be exploited to let in the deadly pressure. Death would take only a moment.

Okay. I could deal with that.

We privately tagged the layer of hydrocarbons "plankton," although compared to terrestrial plankton, this was unthinkably more primitive. The filter-feeder crept along like a lawn mower, and the oily layer imperceptibly oozed closed behind it, leaving a trail of slightly disturbed hydrocarbon. The trail was invisible in sonar and in visible light, but by polarizing our floodlights, we could see a curved line that faded in the distance, faintly extending back as far as our floodlights would reach. At irregular intervals it was crossed by other paths through the slime layer, even older and fainter.

By following the other trails, we found other fish. They were the same in everything except size, identical as clones, equally flat, equally lumpy, equally ugly. They were only sparsely populated across the ocean; I estimated a density of only a single fish in every twenty square kilometers.

"But this is impossible," Hanita said. "Where the hell is the energy source?"

While she had been photographing the fish—the fourth one we had found, identical in all particulars to the other three—I had been thinking. While I thought, I had been analyzing the water, the organics, the electrochemical potentials.

"I can tell you that," I said.

Water rises in the atmosphere, I explained. Rises into the stratosphere, and when it gets high enough it is photodissociated to free oxygen and hydroxl radicals. High in the stratosphere, the radicals recombine into oxygen and to hydrogen peroxide. Heavier than the hydrogen, these cool and fall, tiny cold droplets of oxidant raining slowly into the ocean. No photosynthesis was needed. The oceans were plentiful with dissolved hydrogen, so there was fuel and oxidizer. The pre-biotic molecules self-assemble, fueled by the energy of the oxygen; the filter-feeders subsist on them.

The life was driven by the oxygen cycle, which was, ultimately, driven by sunlight.

"But that can't be very efficient!"

"My quick calculation is that it's about a million times less efficient than the photosynthesis that powers the Earth," I said. "So? It's slow-motion life. Where there is energy, there is life."

* * *

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And then a predator. Of course, there would be predators, I realized; predation was a cheap way to harvest energy—let somebody else do it—and such a rich ecological niche wouldn't stay empty. Sharks, a pack of them. In slow motion, the filter-feeder banked as if to flee, rising up out of the slime layer, but the sharks were inexorable.

The ease with which they ripped the fish apart showed that the filter-feeding life form had no bones, no detectable muscles, no internal structure. It must be more like a motile jellyfish than any sort of true fish, I realized. I swam around, keeping the floodlight on the scene, as Hanita photographed the slaughter. With scoop-like mouths, the sharks suctioned the shreds down their gullets. A few of the fragments, too small for the sharks to bother with, gradually contracted into pancake shape, becoming fingernail-sized copies of the fish that been torn apart. They settled toward the slime layer, and then began to feed.

Then a shark turned on us.

Its mouth was huge. Hanita kept photographing right up to the moment it swallowed her.

Like the filter-feeder, the sharks were transparent to sonar. I turned just a moment too late to see the one that grabbed me.

We cannot possibly be its natural food. The shark had made an unfortunate mistake, and swallowing us was most likely going to poison it.

I was unable to shake free of it. Our diamond bodies were already under hydrostatic pressure of fifty tons per square centimeter, and designed with considerable safety margin, they could withstand far more than that. It was unlikely that the shark could directly harm the craft. Still, trying with futile vigor to rip into us, the shark produced an erratically varying, non-uniform pressure far different from anything that the pod had been designed for, and it would not be very wise to let it continue.

I was briefly sorry for the shark, but there was no choice.

The balloon inflated sluggishly with hydrogen. The shark was disoriented, and attempted to swim, to hold its position, but hydrostatic pressure and Archimedes' law were unforgiving. It was inexorably pulled to the surface. Unwilling, or more likely with too little brainpower to let us go, it bloated and came apart.

As I rose, I grabbed with my manipulator arm, and with a lucky swipe, managed to snag a piece of flesh. A sample.

Bobbing at the surface of the ocean, we were again in electromagnetic contact with the hovering base, bathed in a flood of welcome microwave energy.

I was still alive.

"Wow," I said. "What a ride."

We were floating in darkness on a warm, stagnant sea. "I expected you to kill me," I said.

"It was a dream, all my life, to return," Hanita said, slowly. "And since there was no place to return to, I dreamed I would make a place. It was a nice dream."

"Why?" I said.

"Why didn't I kill you? I don't know." Encased in her pressure shell, she was invisible to me, but in my mind's eye I could see her shake her head. At last, she spoke again. "Can you ever really go back?" she said.

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We have found life in the cold dark, life that could never even conceive of the stars. The gravity is lower than the gravity of Earth, but the well is far deeper. Life in a realm with no metals, no fire. Life that could never escape.

Uranus is ocean, all ocean, an ocean twenty thousand kilometers deep. We have barely seen the outermost skin of the Uranian ocean. What life could there be, in the incalculable depths?

We fire the pyrotechnic separators to sever us from the now-useless steel exostructure of our dolphin bodies, leaving only the naked eggs of our pressure vessels, and the balloons and rockets that will take us home. By burning hydrogen into helium and using the waste heat to fill and then stretch taut the gas-bags, the balloons tug us sluggishly free of the ocean.

Side by side, we rise like jellyfish through the thick air toward the stratosphere. It will take days to reach a height where we can ignite our solid rockets, as the base station, suspended below its microwave-lit sail, dips to meet us. There is still the split-second rendezvous to accomplish, still a thousand things that could go wrong, but for all that, nevertheless the mission is over. We have transmitted the most important parts of our results, the photographs and the chemical analyses, and the base station is broadcasting them across the solar system. In a few hours, everyone will know.

"What will you do now?" I ask her.

"I don't know," she says. She could have asked me the same question, but she doesn't.

But I know.

Life can exist even in the most extreme environment. It is not fragile. It can feed on only the tiniest scraps of energy.

There will be other missions, and beyond them yet other missions. I will let things happen, as I always have, as I always would. The events will flow over me, and I will be unchanged.

Outward, to the farthest horizons, I thought. And beyond them, other horizons, never ending.

Home. O

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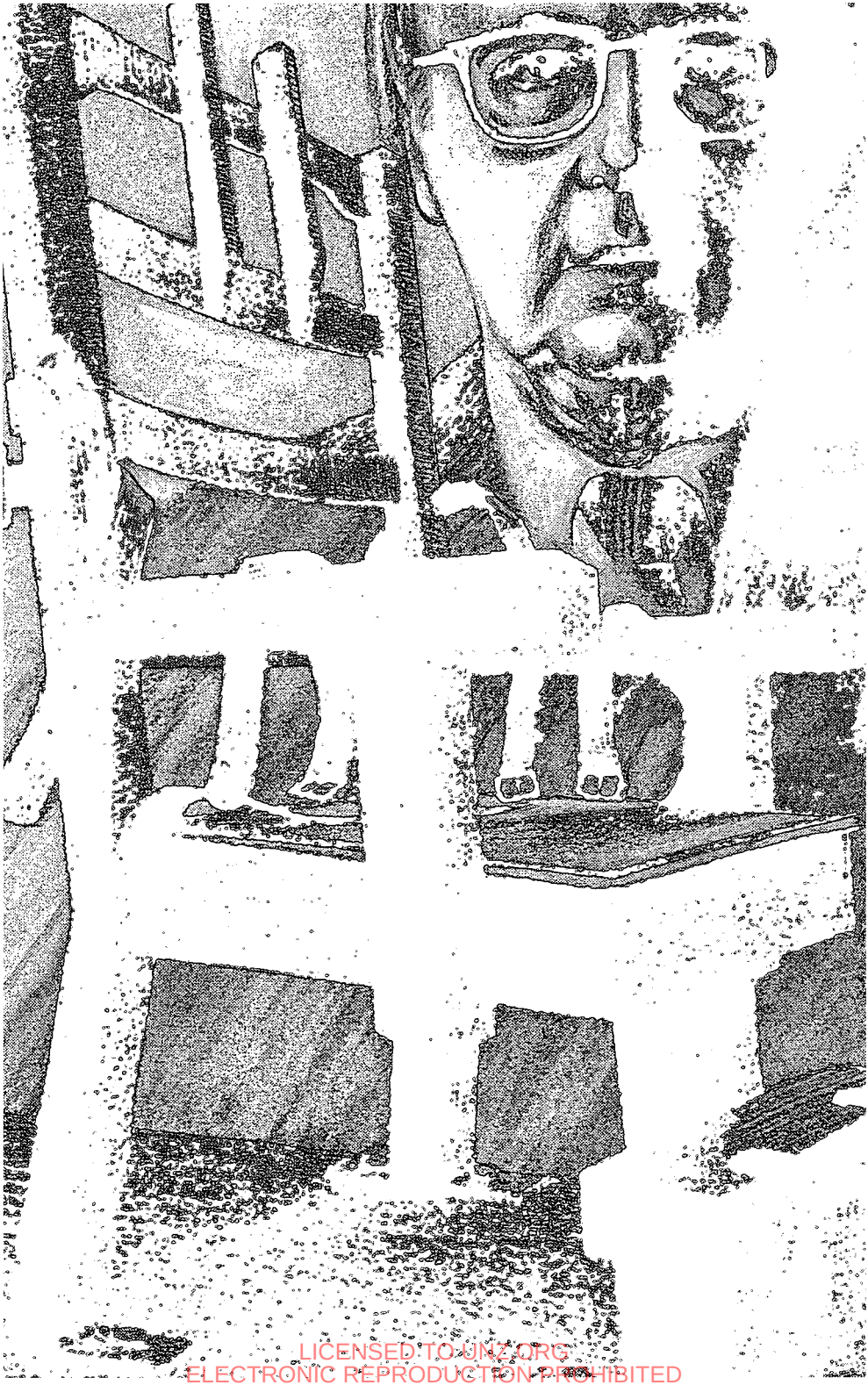

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Andy Duncan

In the early forties, a small Mississippi town receives a visit from an itinerant state employee and an enigmatic stranger who share a macabre membership in . . .

THE EXECUTIONERS' GUILD

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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When the stranger walked into Blackburn's that Friday morning, there were no other customers in the store, unless you counted Stumpy Turlis, which Mrs. Blackburn, a woman of standards, certainly did *not*. The stranger's entrance set the cowbell above the door to jangling, but Mrs. Blackburn did not look up. She figured the bell was just the youngest Cooper child skipping, or, more accurately, stomping outside with her fistful of already-sodden licorice. The child's penny, suspiciously shiny, still lay on the counter where she had, on tiptoe, placed it. Before putting it in the register, Mrs. Blackburn would give it a chance to dry. In the meantime, she had returned to the task at hand, the slicing of a fresh wheel of cheese, always a delicate operation, and one that couldn't wait until noontime when the sandwich crowd came in, jamming up to the counter and talking at once and wanting everything right *then* and not even having the decency to wash the horse sweat and axle grease and chicken feed off their hands before they unwrapped the wax paper and bit into the cheese-and-baloney sandwiches that would not get made, Mrs. Blackburn felt, if she had to waste her whole morning waiting hand and foot on every white-trash ragamuffin in town. Do I look like some old nigger mammy? she sometimes asked Mr. Blackburn in the quiet of the evening, I am not being hateful but I genuinely want to know, because if that is what I *am,* the lowliest servant of every ditch-born lint-picker in the county, I suppose I should claim my rightful place, and collect my meager belongings, and leave this bed that my very presence defiles, and sleep in the stable with the *other* dumb beasts of God's dominion, and having said this, Mrs. Blackburn would dab her eyes with the corner of an apron, and enjoy what, from Mr. Blackburn, passed for reassurance. All that clomp, clomp, clomp, Mrs. Blackburn thought (biting her lip as the wax skin welled up on either side of her sharpest knife), you'd think the child was trying to dig postholes in the floor, and it *just* now polished to a fare-thee-well, and that only after nagging at Mr. Blackburn for a solid month—and thus preoccupied, she allowed Stumpy Turlis to be the first person in Andalusia, Mississippi, actually to speak to the stranger, a humiliation that would gall her to her grave.

"Morning," said Stumpy Turlis.

"Good morning," said the stranger, and Mrs. Blackburn looked up, startled.

"I'm not in your way, am I?" asked Stumpy Turlis.

"Not at all."

"Cause if I *am,* I'll move. I don't want to be no trouble. I can find me some other place to lie."

"You're fine. No trouble at all. Please stay where you are."

Stumpy Turlis, as usual, was lying full-length on the hardware counter, hat on his chest, arms outflung and hanging down on either side. His right hand held a cigarette; his left hand, though it was behind the counter and temporarily out of sight, certainly held a Coca-Cola in some stage of emptiness. On the crown of his hat was a crumpled paper packet commemorating the headache powder he had taken when he came in.

Standing over Stumpy, his back to the grocery counter and to Mrs. Blackburn, was a tall, white-haired, broad-shouldered man in a derby hat, striped gray trousers, and a black knee-length coat. In his right hand was a gray suitcase. Some drummer with a line of brushes, Mrs. Blackburn decided, or liniment, or iron pills. Well, let him talk to that old fool Turlis, and waste *his* time for a change. I must be deaf sure enough, Mrs. Blackburn

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thought, as she added a fresh cheese slice to the growing pile on the cutting board, he's a big man and I didn't even hear him walking. That a *winter* coat? When she'd swept the porch at nine o'clock, the Royal Crown thermometer had already said eighty-six degrees.

"I'm just lying here waiting on my Goody's to kick in," said Stumpy Turlis. "You get headaches much, mister?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Be glad, then. I get 'em something awful. Last for a week. You know why?"

"No, I don't."

"Septum. That's what they told me down in Meridian, I got a septum, a deviated nasal septum. You know what that is?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Causes *headaches,* that's what it is. Just like someone clipped you tween the eyes with the end of a board, only worse. You ever been clipped tween the eyes by a board, mister?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Pray to God you never do. It's bad, real bad, but it ain't as bad as a deviated nasal septum, no Jesus. You're a lucky man all around, that's all I got to say *about* it."

Mrs. Blackburn wondered where the stranger was from; he talked too well, as if he had learned English from a book. She kept expecting him to turn around or walk off or at least shift from side to side, but no, he just stood there, frozen, with head slightly bowed, like an old friend mourning the prone body of Stumpy Turlis. She peeled from the knife a little stringy gibble of cheese and ate it, being careful not to touch her fingers with her mouth. The cheese was soft and mild on her tongue. As she stared at the drummer's back, she felt the cool breath of the nearest rotary fan as it swept its idle gaze across her, as it ruffled her hair and leafed through the Meridian papers in their stack beside the register.

Stumpy Turlis asked, "You want to buy something, mister?"

"No, I only —"

"Cause I don't work here. I can't sell you nothing. You want something, you got to —" Here his voice became low and conspiratorial. "You got to ask *her.*"

Still, he didn't turn around. The fan lost interest and moved on, leaving the sweat on her neck to proceed about its business, and, in the sudden reminder of heat Mrs. Blackburn found her voice and said, loudly, "May I *help* you?" As she said it, she set down her knife and wiped her hands on the inside of her apron.

The drummer turned, nodded, and tipped his hat. "Good morning, madam. No, I'm just browsing, thank you very much." He might have been sixty or he might have been eighty, it was hard to tell, with those heavy black eyeglasses and that puffed-up jowly face. But from across the store, Mrs. Blackburn could tell that his eyes, magnified through Coke-bottle lenses, were perhaps the saddest eyes she ever had seen.

Though she hadn't intended to—since, after all, she could show a drummer the door without moving a step—Mrs. Blackburn found herself bustling toward the hardware counter. As always, she went the long way, around the U formed by the grocery and the dry-goods counters, along the depression that her in-laws and their parents had worn in the floor in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Blackburn disdained any shorter path across the store.

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"We don't need anything more to sell, Lord knows," Mrs. Blackburn said as she passed the tablecloths and aprons. She realized she was still wiping her hands as she walked, and flung the corner of her apron down. "Enough trouble these days selling what we *have,* I don't care what Mr. Roosevelt says about the forties being better, the forties ain't got to Andalusia yet."

"I have nothing to sell," the stranger said with a slight smile, setting down his suitcase and spreading his hands. He turned briefly to Stumpy Turlis, as if for confirmation. "I'm only passing the time. I came in to look around, where it's cool."

"There's cooler places than this," Mrs. Blackburn said, fetching up behind the hardware counter and folding her arms. But her heart wasn't in it. The old man looked not only sad, but tired, and in that ridiculous winter outfit, too. Strange that he didn't seem to be sweating. They regarded each other across the counter. Lying between them was Stumpy Turlis, who eyed Mrs. Blackburn and pulled his nearly empty Coca-Cola bottle back across his chest, out of her reach.

"I ain't in the way, am I?" Stumpy Turlis quavered. "If I am, I can move. I don't want to be no trouble."

"Hush up," Mrs. Blackburn hissed, slapping her palm onto the counter near his head. "What brings you to town, mister?"

She knew this was rude, and half expected no answer at all, but her curiosity was piqued, and besides, she felt she had to wrest the moment back from Stumpy Turlis *somehow.* Whose store *was* this, anyway? Well, her husband's, but weren't husbands and wives the same person under God's law?

Without seeming in the least disturbed, the stranger said: "To meet a man. A colleague. He's not from here, either," and he pronounced it *eye*-ther, "but we have some business to discuss, and this seemed a . . . convenient place." He smiled at her and at Stumpy Turlis, clasped his hands across his belly, then added, "It's a lovely town. The forests are much more hilly than I had expected. Mountainous, practically. Do you get much snow?"

"Not since I been here," Stumpy Turlis volunteered, "and I been living here since ought-four. Working the sawmill. That's where I done busted my head with the plank." After a pause, he clarified: "At the sawmill. You ever get hit in the head with a plank, mister? Oh," he said, beneath Mrs. Blackburn's thunderhead gaze. "Oh, I guess I done asked you that, ain't I?"

"Think nothing of it," the stranger said, and did an extraordinary thing: He reached out and patted Stumpy Turlis on the shoulder. "You've nearly finished your Coke, I see. Shall I buy you another?" Mrs. Blackburn stared at the stranger in wonderment. "I presume there's an icebox, a cooler? Ah, here it is. It's a rare thing," he said, lifting the lid and plunging one hand among the cubes, "to be welcomed with a friendly word in an unfamiliar town. Most rare." With a cascading avalanche sound, he pulled forth a fresh Coca-Cola, slick and shiny and dripping, one bit of ice sliding down into the waist of the bottle. "Here you are. Madam? Care for a drink? No? All right, then." He pulled out another and ignored the bottle opener on the wall to pop the cap against the edge of the countertop, catching it in his other hand as it flipped and pocketing it so quickly Mrs. Blackburn almost missed where it went. Without sitting up, Stumpy Turlis, with the grace of years of practice, reached up and slightly behind his head for the bottle opener, popped the cap, then swooped the neck to his lips without spilling a drop,

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gulping just as the foam surged forth. Both he and the stranger made satisfied drinking sounds. Disgusting! Mrs. Blackburn thought. The stranger pulled from his pocket a handful of coins, which he studied.

"That'll do," Mrs. Blackburn said, snatching a dime. The affable old man in the suit was setting her nerves on edge, and she wanted him gone.

But he just smiled his sad-eyed smile and said, "Thank you."

Stumpy Turlis, meanwhile, was grinning rottenly, evidently feeling he had made a friend for life. He crossed one foot over the other and jiggled it. "Hey, you're all right, mister," he said. "Y'know, I think my headache may be some better, now that you mention it. Not all gone," he added, glancing at Mrs. Blackburn, "not yet, but it's getting there. I'm obliged to you, mister."

The Sunbeam clock showed no more time for this foolishness, yet Mrs. Blackburn was unwilling to leave the stranger alone in the hardware section—alone, because Stumpy Turlis, of course, didn't count. "You *sure* you don't want to look at anything?" she asked.

"Well," said the stranger. "Now that you mention it." He pointed over her head, at the wall behind. "Might I examine a length of that rope?"

Was his finger trembling?

"All righty," Mrs. Blackburn said, feigning jauntiness. She turned to the individual twenty-foot coils of rope, dozens of them hanging in ranks from ancient nails. In the back of the store were longer lengths, of course, and one immense wheel from which any length could be cut, but the short ropes suited most people these days, when so many had decided they were too good to keep horses and mules anymore. She reached up, lifted down a coil, and turned to set it on the counter, but the stranger beat her to it, lifting the rope out of her grasp, bearing it the length of Stumpy Turlis, and setting it down on the counter near the soles of Stumpy's boots. He pulled free a few feet, flexed it experimentally, then tied a knot in it so swiftly that Mrs. Blackburn blinked—this was inch-thick, store-bought rope, hadn't even thought about being broken in, and while Mrs. Blackburn's daddy had taught her a good deal about knot-tying, she didn't recognize the one that the stranger'd just made, nor the one he was setting about making now.

"A good rope," the stranger said, mostly to himself. "Not the best, but a good one, nevertheless."

Something about his twisting, dancing fingers and the rope slithering between them made Mrs. Blackburn remember that night when she was little, when she had followed her daddy and several other men into the woods, wondering where they were going with all that rope. Fighting her way back to the present, back to the store and the stranger and the heat and the fans shaking their heads all around, and the newspapers fluttering in the artificial breeze, she remembered the headlines she'd been looking at all morning, the headlines that had made her expect an even bigger lunch crowd than usual, and, just as her throat was seizing up, she managed to say, in a voice barely above a whisper:

"Withium."

Mr. Blackburn, who was unused to hearing his first name, immediately bestirred himself in the back room he called an office. His grandfather's chair shrieked as he rolled it backward. Mrs. Blackburn heard the curtain whip aside, and then she heard her husband lumber forth, the jingle of coins as he hitched up his pants. He was beside her, his breath audible, his tobacco-tinged sweat awful but welcome. The Blackburns looked at each

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other, and then at the stranger, who pulled the rope taut and relaxed it again, then taut, then relaxed, then taut again.

"Mister," Mr. Blackburn said. "Hey, mister!"

The stranger looked up, blinked, as if peering through a fog. Whatever Mrs. Blackburn had expected, it wasn't the bland, placid expression the stranger had worn all along. "Yes?" he asked. He looked at each of them. "I'm sorry. Is anything wrong?"

"Not *yet,* no," Mr. Blackburn said. "Listen, mister. We don't want any trouble this weekend, okay? I mean, we know people will be coming from all over, to meet their friends and be sociable, and see what they can see, but as for—well, as for the job *itself,* that's a job for the county, and the sheriff, and the man what's been hired by the county. Understand?"

The stranger's face darkened. His shoulders seemed to broaden. The rope slipped from his hands. Several feet rustled to the floorboards, but then it slowed and stopped, most of it still coiled atop the counter.

Mr. Blackburn went on: "Now, there's some as think that's a good idea, and some as don't. But I'm on the County Council myself, and I'll tell you, I think it's for the good. But whether we like it or not, it's going to happen at the courthouse, and the townsfolk aren't going to have any part of it, except a few witnesses, and folks from out of town—well, they *sure* pop ain't gonna have anything to do with it! Like I said, it's a job for the sheriff." He nodded in agreement with himself and hitched his pants again. "So I don't think you'll be needing no rope today, mister. You understand me?"

The stranger said nothing. His lips trembled. Mrs. Blackburn was horrified to entertain the suspicion that the old man might cry. Instead, he turned and walked slowly, ponderously, over to his suitcase—he really *is* a big man, she thought, we'd be in real trouble if he—then lifted it and walked to the door, stopped as he pulled it inward, setting off the cowbell, and looked back at the three of them. He said, with great formality and dignity: "I am no murderer. Nor am I an *amateur.* Good morning." He closed the door behind him, clumped across the porch, and was gone. The little blonde girl holding the buttered slice of Sunbeam said that the time was 11:05.

The sheriff smelled the food before he heard Miss Esther coming up the stairs, mumbling non-stop to God and her ancestors. He was waiting on the landing when the flowers on her straw hat bobbed into view.

"Hey, Miss Esther. Lemme help you with that."

"Thank you kindly, Sheriff."

She was the tiniest, most dried-up-looking little colored woman you would ever hope to meet, and, as she liked to put it, only God knew how old she was. So the sheriff was surprised when he took the basket from her hands.

"My Lord, Miss Esther! What all you *got* in this thing? You pack the stove you cooked it on?" He held the door for her as she cackled.

"That's my biggest frying pan," she said. "I wanted to fry up a mess of chicken—"

"Oh, my goodness," the sheriff said, lifting the wicker lid. Hooper and Nat gathered round, making wordless appreciative noises.

"—and I remembered I'd done left my big serving bowl down at the A.M.E. We had revival last week. So I just decided to tote it over in the pan. Poured off the grease, now."

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"I like the grease myself," Nat said, already munching on a chicken leg. "I sops my biscuits in it." The sheriff nodded at Hooper, who began transferring food from Miss Esther's heavy pans and crockery into tin plates from the jailhouse cupboard.

"Sheriff, if you wouldn't mind . . ."

"Don't worry, Miss Esther. We'll take it on down to him. You don't have to go near."

Miss Esther's voice dropped. She peered over her spectacles and clutched the front of her dress. "I ain't *never* been talked to like that man did, Sheriff."

"I hope you ain't, Miss Esther. It was awful."

"Not even by the trash what lives in the hollow, and *certainly* not by a colored man."

"There was no excuse for it, Miss Esther. Don't get yourself all worked up, now. You don't have to go near that one anymore."

Miss Esther glanced toward the barred door that led to the cells, closed her eyes, and shuddered. "I had been praying for the man," she said, "praying for his repentance, for he, like all of us, is one of God's creatures." Her voice was breaking. "But Sheriff, I done told the other ladies *they* gone have to do *my* share of his praying from now on!"

Nat was already on his second chicken leg, and watching Miss Esther like she was some windup toy set moving for his amusement. The sheriff tried to steer her toward the stairs. Lord, these old gals could turn up the melodrama when they wanted to! Just like his own mama—though she'd faint dead away to hear him compare her to a colored woman.

"Now, don't you worry, Miss Esther. I'll have Hooper bring the basket back to you. We thank you again." The others dutifully repeated their thanks, Nat's somewhat muffled by chicken.

On the landing, Miss Esther turned, suddenly dry-eyed, and asked in a low voice: "That truck coming today?"

"Yes, ma'am. Anytime now."

"Good," she said. "Can't come soon enough for *that* one." She whispered, "He ain't nothing but a *nigger,*" and then covered her mouth with her hands.

The sheriff fought a grin. "We thank you again for the dinner," he said. "We thank you kindly."

Miss Esther was paid once a month out of the jail budget, and recently had renegotiated her terms with the council, but she and the sheriff never discussed such unpleasant topics.

"I'm pleased to do it, Sheriff," she said, creeping down the stairs, flowers bobbing. "Does my heart good to know y'all are eating well. Lord, these steps, there's more of 'em ever *time* I come in the door, but Jesus walks where Queenesther walks, yes He does, and Queenesther's feet are His feet, and Queenesther's hands are His hands . . ." She disappeared. The sheriff went back inside and picked up his club, wincing as he did so—he wasn't Sheriff Langley, after all.

"Let's go, Hooper. Nat, keep your ears open. And you *might* save some chicken for the rest of us," he added.

Nat's face fell, and he chewed more slowly. In a small voice, he said: "Ain't had but two legs."

"That's all most chickens *got,*" the sheriff said, unlocking and trundling aside the corridor door. Hooper, carrying the dinner, walked ahead, past

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three empty cells on the left, three empty cells on the right. Once again the sheriff thanked God the place was otherwise empty. Even the town drunks had lain low the past few weeks; when the heat wave rolled in, the whole town settled down like a dog under a stove. At the end of the corridor was a small grilled outside window, a supply closet on the right, a final, larger cell on the left. The men stopped before this cell. The sheriff studied its inhabitant before moving to unlock the door.

As always, the wiry colored man with the high, bulging forehead sat on the bunk with his back to the corner and his knees up, sock feet on the mattress, looking out the window at the sky and the visible corner of the Masonic Hall. His arms were folded across his stomach, and his hands dangled. There was no sign of energy, until he slowly turned his head and looked at the men with bright, staring eyes.

"Set still, Childress," the sheriff said, shoving back the door just wide enough for Hooper to get in, set the food on the spindly legged table, and get out. The prisoner didn't move. Skin prickling, the sheriff rolled the door closed, locked it, tugged on it, and turned to go.

"Mr. Simpson got here yet?" Childress asked. He had a voice like a bird chirping.

"This afternoon," the sheriff said, still looking toward the far end of the corridor.

"Cause I got something to tell the man."

"You'll have your chance," the sheriff said. It was what he always said. Childress had been asking for two weeks.

Then Childress asked: "Where's the bitch at?"

The sheriff looked at Childress, whose face was expressionless save for his dancing eyes. He still hadn't moved. If anything, his shoulders had slumped, and he looked even more languid, as if all his energy were going into his words and his eyes.

"The *old* bitch," Childress explained. "I been all worked up to look at her ass a little bit. Check her out. Old ain't gold but it ain't loose change neither. Reckon she'd slip me some if y'all looked the other way? I ain't got nowhere else to put it, I might's well put some of it in there—"

"You shut your mouth," the sheriff said, his hand tight on his club.

"Don't get all het *up* now," Childress said. "I won't be putting it in till *y'all* be taking it *out*. I 'magine it's mighty roomy in there, but it ain't roomy enough for *both* of us!"

Hooper muttered a curse. Without looking, the sheriff grabbed his arm.

"Take it easy," the sheriff said.

"I don't mind being at the tail end of the train," Childress went on. "I know where the niggers get to ride. Just so I gets me a little piece of the *caboose*. Ha-haaaa!" It wasn't a laugh so much as a whine, and his face twitched when he emitted it, as if it was involuntary.

"Childress," the sheriff said, "you might as well stop trying to get a rise out of us. We ain't gonna do anything stupid. You ain't dealing with Cooter Langley, you know. You're gonna sit right there until your time comes." As the sheriff talked, Childress looked back out the window, moving his lips silently, as if mouthing the words. "And it's gonna be done by the book, you got me? The old days are gone, Childress."

"Bright, white, quite new day," the prisoner murmured. "I feels less like a nigger *all* the time."

"By the book," the sheriff repeated. He took a deep breath. Because he

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had been raised Methodist, he added: "Time like this, a man ought to be thinking about meeting his God."

Childress burst out laughing and turned back to the sheriff, grinning. "Listen at this *God* shit!" he said. "*You* all the God a nigger needs in *this* here town! You gone be waiting for me on the other side, too?"

"Jesus," the sheriff said, yanking Hooper's elbow. "Let's go."

"Maybe you gone climb up on that chair and ride out of town with me? That be some kinda ride, all right!"

"Let's *go*, I said."

Now facing the window again, Childress spoke in a dreamy voice, as if reciting something half-forgotten: "Fuck your white ass, fuck your white laws, and fuck your white God."

Shoving Hooper down the hall, the sheriff fumbled through his keys. As he slammed and locked the corridor door behind him, Nat handed him a plate. "Here you go, Sheriff," Nat said.

The sheriff looked at the chicken, rice, turnips, and biscuits, and felt a surge of nausea. "You can have mine," he muttered, and strode out of the office. Air, he thought as he stomped downstairs, got to get some air. In the lobby, heels clicking on the newly inlaid tile, he walked to the fountain, splashed his face with warm, rusty water, and felt a little easier. He wondered, as he often did, whether the water in the coloreds' fountain was any better. He doubted it. Less than a day, he kept telling himself. Less than a day to go.

The truck rolled into town at noon, not from the direction of Meridian, like most Andalusia traffic, but from the north, and so it caught by surprise the dozens of people who were in the courthouse square solely to look for the truck. Most of the crowd, neighbors and strangers alike, had gravitated by silent consent to the southern side of the courthouse. It not only offered a clear view down Tyburn Street, which eventually became the Meridian highway, but was shady thanks to the Confederate oaks. Here groups of men and women, but mostly men, sat on benches or the marble steps or perched amid tree roots or just walked slowly back and forth, fanned themselves and mopped their faces with handkerchiefs, and looked down Tyburn toward the ice plant, and talked to each other in low tones. There were also many children about, a surprising number, because they normally could find cooler places to play, and dinner should have been waiting at home. But there they were: gangs of them, boys and girls alike, ran and shrieked and played tag among the lampposts and raised such a ruckus that the shopkeepers would have complained if it had been a normal business day—but, of course, it wasn't. The shopkeepers themselves stood in their doorways, on alert, afraid they'd miss something. Most of the adults were secretly thankful for all the whooping hollering children in the square, because the adults were all a damn sight more hush-mouthed than usual, and even people who normally hailed each other across the street, today just nodded in silence and glanced away, and without the children, the square would have suffered a quiet that was unthinkable.

The square was unusual in one more respect: There were no Negroes in sight. The ones who worked in the businesses that fronted the square either stayed inside, finding things to do in the back rooms, or had stayed home sick. The maids and cooks of the town's few well-off inhabitants, who normally would have come to the square to do the day's shopping, were instead

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having their groceries delivered, or making do. Old Paul, who shined shoes beneath the largest oak every day, was nowhere to be seen. If any of the white people noticed his absence, or the absence of the other Negroes, no one mentioned it.

The first to see the truck was the youngest Woodham boy, Joshua. He was heading home despite the jeers of his friends because he knew his mama would snatch a knot in him if he didn't have his elbows on the oilcloth to say the blessing by 12:05. As he cut across the north lawn of the courthouse, Joshua saw a pretty new red-white-and-blue sign in his path, with a bald eagle on it. It said: "Keep off the grass." Joshua studied it, decided it was Federal doins, and kept walking. His route took him past the Confederate memorial, which was taller even than Joshua's daddy, but not so big around that Joshua couldn't hope to be able to reach around it one day and join hands with himself on the other side. He stopped and flattened himself against the pillar and made the attempt for the umpteenth time, not because he really thought his arms had gotten longer in the past half-hour, but because the marble was cool and musty against his face, and up close and sideways the letters of the dead men's names looked like a secret code that only Joshua could read. He was standing there against the marble when he heard what sounded like a sawmill truck laboring up a grade. He stepped away from the monument and walked around it, dragging his fingertips across it until the marble slipped away, and there was the truck, shifting gears with a shriek as it rumbled down Rose Avenue toward the square. People were coming out of the stores along Rose to look at it.

Joshua was interested to see that the truck didn't have a skull and crossbones on the side, like Eddie Dunn said it would, and it didn't have skeletons tied across the hood with their mouths open, like the Derrick twins said it would. He hadn't but half believed those stories in the first place. Joshua knew this was the right truck, though, because it had the seal of the state of Mississippi on the door, because a billowing green tarpaulin covered up everything on the flatbed, and because the driver stopped at the corner, stuck his head out the window and hollered to Joshua, "If this ain't Andalusia, I don't know *where* the hell I am!"

"It's Andalusia sure enough," Joshua hollered back. "Far as I know," he added. Joshua had learned from the grown-ups in his family to qualify nearly every assertion he made.

"*Out*-standing," the driver said. He looked to left, then right, then left again, though all the automobiles in sight were parked, and then he turned into the square, hauling on the steering wheel with both hands. The hood vibrated like a tin roof in a hailstorm, and the engine was full of cats. Still wrestling the wheel, the driver eased the truck alongside the curb, hauled up on the brake, and choked the thing down. Joshua watched as he flung open the creaking door and stepped out. He was tall, though not as tall as Joshua's daddy, and thin, but there were muscles beneath his rolled-up shirtsleeves, and scars, too, one down one arm like a railroad track, and another, thinner one right across his jaw past the corner of his mouth, so that he looked to be smiling. Then Joshua realized that the man *was* smiling. "How you doing today, partner?" the man asked Joshua, hands on his hips and stretching.

Purdie Newall, who had let Joshua kiss her just last week and might again, had said the truck would be driven by a man with fangs and a long black robe. This was the only truck story that Joshua had hoped was true.

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But, to be polite, he answered, just as his daddy would: "Doing all right, I reckon. How you?"

Some of the people from Rose Street were walking across, and others were beginning to come around the side of the courthouse.

"'Bout stove up from driving," the man said. "You ain't old enough to drive, I guess."

"No, sir."

"Well, don't you ever start. They ain't much that's worth driving *to,* and that's the truth."

Grown-ups began, silently, to gather around, and Joshua felt that his chance to talk to the driver wouldn't last long. Joshua tried to prolong it by thinking of grown-up things to say.

"Damn truck 'bout knocks my teeth out," the driver continued, grinning to reveal two or three gaps. By now, a dozen or more people stood there, but the driver acted as if it was still just Joshua. "And I don't know *who* drew that map, but I'm glad they got the work, because they must a been blind and feeble and on relief! And they ain't no road signs for nigh on thirty miles. Not even a sign that says Andalusia on it. For all I knew, this town coulda been named Rotary, or Burma-Shave, or Get Right with God."

"Don't nobody come into town thataway," Joshua said.

"I don't blame 'em," the man said. "I hope there's someplace to eat on the other side of this courthouse. Otherwise, I'll just have to cry. Come help me tie down this tarp, partner. It's been flapping for a solid hour."

Suddenly remembering his dinner and then just as suddenly forgetting it again, Joshua trotted with the driver to the back of the truck, where several no-count-looking men whispered among themselves. They backed away from the driver, who still acted as if he and Joshua were alone. Joshua clambered onto the tailgate and sat, bare feet dangling, while the driver fumbled with the knots.

"Never was no good at tying things," the driver said. "I guess you ain't either. I see your shoes done fell off."

"Didn't put on no shoes today."

"How come?"

Joshua felt a stab of pity for the man. "It's *summertime,*" he said.

"Oh," the driver said. "No *wonder* it's so hot! I sorta lose track sometimes. All right, I guess that'll hold her." Joshua jumped down and stood beside the driver, both of them looking up at the vast green bulk on the flatbed. A rare breeze stirred up, and the tarp bulged slightly outward in one place, as if weakly pushed from inside.

Looking up at the truck with his back to the crowd, able to hear the footsteps and the faltering, dying voices as more people joined the group and were silenced, Joshua felt the way he sometimes felt at church, on the front row with the rest of the children. He felt the silence of everyone behind him pushing the back of his head, goading him to break the silence, to jump up and say something.

"What you got in there, mister?" Joshua asked.

"Electric chair," the man replied.

Whenever Joshua or anyone else said something ugly, his Grandma Nellie would suck in her breath like she was trying to pull the words right out of the air and hide them. When the driver said, "Electric chair," all the grown-ups around them made a Grandma Nellie sound.

Joshua knew that most grown-ups driving around the countryside with

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an electric chair in the back would not admit it to a youngun. Joshua decided to see what else the man would admit to. "What for?" he asked.

"Kill people with it," the man replied. Another Grandma Nellie sound from the crowd.

Joshua was liking this man more and more all the time. "What you do *that* for?" he asked, though he knew the answer to that one, too.

Looking down at Joshua, the driver suddenly seemed a lot older, and the first facial scar Joshua had noticed, he now realized, was far from the only one. The driver looked as sad as Joshua's daddy had looked when they'd buried Aunt Sophie. The driver reached down and rubbed the top of Joshua's head, which Joshua had always hated, though he decided that this time he could stand it. "*Someone's* got to," the driver said. "It's the law."

"Can I sit in it?" Joshua asked, and everybody standing around busted out laughing, like it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. They all got to talking to each other, repeating what Joshua had said and whooping and carrying on, and Joshua felt his cheeks burn and wished they all would shut up and go away, grown-ups thought younguns were so funny. But the driver didn't laugh; if anything, he looked even sadder. Still ignoring the others, he squatted to look Joshua in the face and said, "I can't let you do that, friend. You ain't mean enough to sit in that chair."

Joshua was determined not to cry, but when he spoke, he was disgusted to hear a tiny little snubbing kid's voice. "I bet *you* sit in it when you want."

Now the driver did laugh, but it wasn't a smart-aleck laugh, and Joshua grinned back, feeling better. The driver said: "I'll tell you a secret, partner. I'll tell you something I ain't never told anyone."

A large hairy-knuckled hand took hold of the driver's shoulder, not roughly, but firmly, and Joshua looked up, and up. The sheriff was so tall and big, with his huge head and his eyes set way back beneath his eyebrows, that some of Joshua's friends thought he was scary, but to Joshua he looked like the picture of John C. Calhoun in his history book, in the chapter about the War of Northern Aggression. And how could anyone who looked like John C. Calhoun be bad?

"Jimmy Simpson?" the sheriff said. His voice rumbled like feed in the chute at the mill.

"Yes, sir, that's me," the driver said, standing up. He didn't look scared, either, just respectful. Joshua scowled. He'd never find out the secret now. He focused all the hatred he had felt for the crowd on the sheriff alone, but the sheriff didn't notice.

"I'm Sheriff Davis." The men shook hands.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Welcome to Andalusia. I think you'll be right comfortable here. Got a room ready for you at Miss Pearse's, and she sets a mighty good table."

"I thank you."

"Now, let's go on in and talk about getting you set up here. Then we'll head to the cafe and get us something to eat, on the county. My deputies will watch your truck, and all."

"That sounds good, Sheriff."

Determined to pretend he wasn't being ignored, Joshua stuck as close as he could to the driver's heels as the two men moved through the crowd. He'd never seen this many people in the square before. He saw a lot of farmer's shoes, with dusted-over dried-up mud, and worse, lining every crack and crease in the leather, but he saw a lot of fancier shoes, too, and a lot of

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women in heels. As they went up the walk toward the courthouse steps, the sheriff talked to the now-noisy crowd the whole time, low and gentle, the way Joshua's daddy talked to the cows. "Come *on,* people. Let us through. Go on about your business. Go on back to the store, Bill. There ain't nothing here to see. No, I'm afraid not, Mrs. Burchett. All that's tomorrow. You won't miss nothing by going on home. That's a mighty cute one you got there. What's he, three months old, now? My, *my.* Yes, ma'am, just go on home. That's the best thing. Move along, folks. Please move along. Mr. Simpson?"

The driver had stopped at the foot of the steps to look around. Joshua, thrilled, tugged at the man's jeans. He looked down and grinned. "Hang on a second, Sheriff," he said. He squatted, looked Joshua in the face, took him by the shoulders, and whispered: "Don't tell nobody."

"I won't."

"Sometimes, when I'm driving around the country all by myself—"

"Uh-huh."

"—and I come to some lonely pretty place, where the road runs longside a river or a mountain valley—"

"Yeah?"

"—I stop the truck, and get out, and roll up the tarp, and climb in, and I sit in that big old chair and eat my sandwiches."

Joshua thought this was about the most worthless secret he'd ever heard, but, to be polite, he smiled.

"It sits pretty good," the driver said, "and from up high like that, you can see a long long way." The driver squeezed Joshua's arms, nodded at him, then stood. "All right, Sheriff, let's go."

As a deputy opened the door, the sheriff asked, "That your assistant?" The driver said something Joshua couldn't hear, and the men both laughed as they went inside. A big pair of khaki-covered legs moved in front of Joshua, and he looked up to see a gum-chewing deputy looking down at him, arms folded.

"You better not go in there, partner," the deputy said. It was the same thing the driver had called him. Grown-ups were all alike. As Joshua turned to go, the deputy said, "Hey, ain't you Jack Woodham's baby boy? Yeah, that's right. How old are you getting to be? You're a cute little feller!"

Joshua looked up at the deputy with the most contempt he had ever mustered for an adult, then looked back down and said, to his own great surprise, "Shit," drawing it out just like his daddy did. He turned and walked back through the thicket of legs to a clear patch of lawn, where his friends descended.

"Hey, you were talking to him, weren't you?"

"What'd you talk about?"

"What'd he say?"

"Is he going to let us see the chair?"

"What'd you talk about?"

"I'll tell you later," Joshua said, not breaking stride. He'd make up something good, but he didn't feel like it just now. He was hungry. "I got to go home," he added, and sped up as the others fell away, making aw-shucks sounds. He called back, "Tell Purdie he's missing a few fangs!" Behind him they all chattered about this new information. As Joshua passed the Confederate monument, he kicked it.

"Anything I can do?" asked a strange voice, a voice that didn't sound like

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anyone Joshua had grown up with. Sounded like Orson Welles on the radio. He looked around. Standing alone on the lawn, with a suitcase beside him, was a tall old man with glasses, dressed all in black. Had he been there before? Joshua must have walked right through him, practically. He had his hands folded in front of him like a deacon. "You look upset," the old man said. "Is something wrong?"

At least he didn't talk like he was talking to a baby. "Naw," Joshua said. "The truck just ain't what I expected, is all."

The old man smiled. "Nor I," he said, gazing toward the crowd.

Joshua looked at him more closely and asked, "Ain't you hot in that coat, mister?"

The old man glanced at him, looking just as sad as the driver. "Actually, I'm a bit chilly," he said, looking back toward the crowd. "Aren't you?"

Disgusted, Joshua turned and headed on home. Grown-ups were all crazy. Must be nearbouts 12:30 by now. His mama was gonna whale him for sure. He hoped there was still some crackling bread, and ham hocks, and molasses. Sits in the chair whenever *he* wants to. Shit. "Shit," Joshua said aloud, drawing out the syllables for effect, and repeated it all the way home.

This man Simpson could put away the food. As the sheriff toyed with a stale cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie—which Doris *would* put a square of cheese on, no matter how many times the sheriff left it hardening amid the crumbs on his plate—his companion ate two cheeseburgers and a pile of french fries, and these were Doris's fries, thick as railroad ties and nearbouts as heavy.

"You want any more tea, hon?" asked Doris, chin in hands, elbows on counter. The sheriff's coffee had long since gone cold from his and Doris's joint neglect, but she hadn't let Simpson's tea get more than an inch below the rim of the glass in the past half-hour. Granted, the cafe wasn't exactly busy in mid-afternoon, but still, this was a bit shameless even for Doris, known countywide as a fast worker.

"No, thank you, ma'am," Simpson said, mopping the last of his ketchup with his last french fry. Won't be no need to wash the damn *plate,* the sheriff thought. "It all sure was good, though."

"I'm glad you liked it," Doris said. "Like to keep folks coming back, when I can. How long did you say you'd be in town?"

The sheriff cleared his throat, finally earning Doris's languid attention, and said, "Uh, Doris, Deputy Stewart's been out there in the hot a good while." He nodded toward the cafe's front window, through which Stewart's arm was visible, draped across the back of a bench. "How 'bout seeing if he wants some tea, and maybe a piece of pie."

Doris looked at the sheriff with her mouth pulled sideways, not fooled, but not quite discouraged either. "Whatever you say, Sheriff," she said, straightening up. To Simpson, she said, "You don't let this tough guy here take *all* your time, now." She squeezed his arm as she sashayed away.

"No, ma'am," Simpson said, turning and watching her go. He looked back at the sheriff and grinned. "Lord have mercy!"

The sheriff grunted. He glanced at his notebook, at the few details that he had written down, underlined, and circled. He lifted his pencil. Now he would put check marks beside them. "So, five o'clock is gonna work fine, then?"

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"Five A.M., yes sir."

"And the basement is best, you think."

"That's right. Nearbouts soundproof, easy to secure, plenty of hookups. And the truck's right there, so unloading will be some easier. The swinging doors are plenty wide. Need some help toting the thing inside, though."

"You'll get it. You want it in tonight, right?"

"Yes, sir, about midnight would be plenty of time. Don't want to do it when everybody's out and about. The prisoner won't see us, will he?"

"His window don't point that way."

"That's good. No need to worry him any more than he already is."

"Agreed," said the sheriff, wondering again what he ought to tell Simpson about Childress' attitude. He knew his caution was ridiculous; the man who pulled the switch didn't need to be protected from the man who sat in the chair. But Simpson had impressed him. The sheriff could tell when someone's calm was feigned, as his own was just now; Jimmy Simpson's was the genuine article. You'd think he was in town for a Masonic meeting. Bizarre though the feeling was, the sheriff wished he could deliver into Simpson's hands someone more worthy of him. Oh, well, maybe next time. "And I'll double-check with the witnesses," the sheriff continued. "Make sure they know what's expected of 'em, and are willing to do it."

"How many?"

"Three's the law in this county," the sheriff said, proudly; it was one of the newer laws. "Plus a doctor, plus me, plus the deputies, just in case. We don't expect no trouble. Most folks think it's gonna be high noon, or midnight, or some such nonsense. But the deputies will be there to give you a hand, if you need it."

"Shouldn't," Simpson said. "You not gonna eat that pie?"

"Take it." The sheriff shoved the saucer across the table.

"Thank you. No, I ain't needed an assistant yet." He smiled, ducked his head, and for a second his scars seemed to vanish, leaving his face almost boyish. "Frankly, sheriff, just between you and me, it looks impressive, but it ain't that complicated a machine. Why, in ten minutes I could teach you how to work it yourself."

The sheriff laughed, maybe too loudly. "I believe I'll leave it to you, thank you."

"Fair enough," Simpson said, still grinning. "I guess I'll talk myself out of a job one of these days. But I ain't complaining. I'm glad for the work, and I know there's a lot of others who'd be glad for it, too."

The sheriff bore down hard as he made one more check. "If we're lucky, it'll all be over, and the truck loaded again, by the time the town gets stirring good."

"Taking down's always easier than setting up," Simpson said. "Hard work afterward's on your end."

"Tell me about it," the sheriff said. As Simpson made appreciative pie noises, the sheriff re-read his list:

ambulance (remind Mr. Craddock)
funeral home (bring $$$)
autopsy forms (ask Hooper)
FAMILY???
med-school truck ten A.M.
bread milk shaving cream Goody's

"The cash gonna be any problem?" Simpson asked.

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"No, sir," the sheriff said. "I'll have it for you when the job's done."

"*Out*-standing," Simpson said. "Cash, you know, is just easier, on the road and all."

"I understand."

"From here, they got me going to Corinth, and then way the hell down in Pascagoula, for God's sake! That's some planning, let me tell you. That's some coordination. What sort of roads they think we got in Mississippi?"

The sheriff watched Doris chatting up Deputy Stewart outside. She was doing that thing where she pretended her back hurt, so that she kept stretching backward, hands on hips, pelvis stuck out in the deputy's face, nearly. Her back *ought* to hurt. Tapping the table with the pencil, the sheriff tried to make his voice as flat as possible, rid it of any hint of insinuation. "You need an advance? For tonight, I mean."

"Naw," Simpson said, dropping shiny fork onto shiny saucer with a clatter and reaching for the toothpick shaker. On his ring finger was a gold band with a little empty rectangle inscribed on it. "Too busy. Got to get the paperwork ready, check the equipment, get it unloaded, get it set up, check the connections. Might have a couple hours' sleep, maybe, but then got to be up again by four, checking everything again."

"Thought you said it wasn't complicated."

"It ain't, really," Simpson said, with a shrug. "But you don't want it to go wrong, all the same."

The sheriff laid down his pencil, sat back with a sigh, flashed the palms of his hands before slapping the table, and asked, "What else can I do for you?"

"Well, Sheriff, I'm curious." Simpson rested one foot on the seat and leaned back into the corner. "I'd appreciate your telling me a few things about him, if you don't mind."

"'Bout who?"

"My client." Simpson laughed. "Well, I guess that ain't the right word, is it? *You're* my client, you and the county. But that's the word we—the word I use in my head. The prisoner, I mean."

"Oh, him." The sheriff drummed the tabletop. "Well, he's a bad one. That's all I know to say. Didn't you get a report?"

Simpson pulled from his shirt pocket a dirty, ragged paper square. It looked like it had been folded and unfolded many times. "All I got was the usual notice from down at Parchman." He squinted at the typescript as he read aloud. "'Dear Sir: This is to inform you that one execution is scheduled for Friday night or Saturday morning, June twenty-third or twenty-fourth, nineteen hundred and forty-one, at Andalusia, Mississippi, under the supervision of Sheriff Edwin Davis, exact time to be arranged by you and the sheriff, in the case of the murderer William Childress, and we shall expect you and the mobile equipment to be present no later than noon of the previous day. Kindly acknowledge by wire the receipt of this notice. Very truly yours,' yaddy yaddy." Folding the paper again, Simpson squinted at the sheriff. "The state don't figure I need to know any more than that, but I get curious. I figure I ought to know the facts of the case, if I'm gonna be there for the end of it."

The sheriff nodded. "Makes sense to me. Well, like I say, he's a bad one. Strange thing is, he didn't use to be. Long as I've known him, he was the humblest colored man you ever saw. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. It was yes sir and yes ma'am and morning and evening to you and head bowed

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and stepping off the sidewalk and tipping his hat when even the white younguns came by." He laughed, suddenly remembering. "Hell, I used to hire him now and again to clear off brush in my back field, things like that. Never no trouble to anybody."

"No run-ins with the law?"

"Oh, hell yes, I mean, he was a colored man after all, no wife and no kids to rein him in, neither. Some drinking and some gambling and a few fights, but nothing much. Nothing to get all hepped up about." Warming to his story, and to the drama of a new audience, the sheriff leaned across the table, lowered his voice. "Then one of his poker buddies, some of that white trash down around Millville way, got to messing around with some yaller woman that Childress was messing with too, and when Childress found out, why he went over to Mr. George's place, where the coloreds get their hair cut, and walked in and snatched up a razor and walked out without a howdy or a by-your-leave or a go-to-hell neither, and by the time we caught up to him, he'd done laid that old boy open like a hog, and was sitting on the porch waiting on the yaller woman to come home, so he could do the same for her. He was looking up at the clouds, lounging against the post all limp and dreamy-like, and didn't give us no fight at all. Just shuffled along with us to the patrol car, and that boy's blood running down off his overalls into the dust the whole way." He realized he had a half-smile on his face, as if he had told a punchline he was proud of. He cleared his throat, tried to look somber, and felt ashamed.

Without expression, Simpson asked: "Is that what bothers you so about him? What he done?"

So it was that obvious. The sheriff sighed and relaxed his shoulders. In the fingers of one hand, he had been rolling a tiny torn-off bit of paper napkin; he tossed it onto the tablecloth. "Oh, hell no," he said. "I mean, it was bad, but no different from a dozen other bad things I've seen. No, what's *bad* is what happened to him *after*."

"After the killing."

"After the trial," the sheriff said. "I mean, after the verdict. He was quiet and peaceful all the way through. Wouldn't say a word. But *then,* when he found out it was . . . what it was—well, sir, Willie Childress stood up in that courtroom and began telling the judge and all the rest of us exactly what he thought of us, and kept on doing it while we were dragging him away, and such language you never *heard,* Lord have mercy! Every time he opens his mouth, something awful falls out. The poor old colored woman who does for us at the jail, she went running off in tears the other day. I can't hardly stand to look at the man anymore myself."

Now it was Simpson's turn to lean forward. "What sorts of things does he say?"

"Uh-uh. *I* ain't gonna repeat them. I'm a Christian man. You'll find out soon enough, I'm afraid."

Simpson nodded, then sipped at his tea. The sip led to a second sip, then to a long, sustained gulp. Then he held up the glass, tipped it from side to side, and watched the ice clink. "I don't know, Sheriff," he said. "I ain't had this job long, but I ain't seen a mean one *yet* that stayed mean the whole way. You know? Seeing what's there for them . . . well, it pretty much knocks all the mean slam out."

"I hope you're right," the sheriff said. He was suddenly bone-tired, and wished he had some fresh coffee. "Not just for his sake, for everybody's. It

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just ain't *right,* the way he's acting. Don't he know where he is? Don't he know what's gonna happen to him? I never heard of such."

Simpson rested the damp tea glass against his cheek. "Listen, Sheriff. I'm gonna ask you something you may think is strange."

The sheriff shrugged. "Well, you got a strange job—no offense. I'm listening."

"I'd like to meet him. This afternoon, if it's possible."

"What for?"

"It's hard to explain." Simpson set his glass down, picked it up, set it down. He looked at the back wall over the sheriff's head, where, the sheriff knew, a calendar cowgirl in a short skirt perched on a split-rail fence, blowing imaginary smoke from the barrel of her gun. Simpson didn't seem to register the calendar. "Think about my position, Sheriff. This is your town. You know everybody that comes through your jail. You may not like them, but you know them. Even the bad ones, even the ones you send to their reward, it's like . . . well, it's sorta like a community thing, a family thing." He squinted at the sheriff again. "Makes it feel more *right,* somehow. You follow me?"

"I reckon."

"Well, now here *I* come, driving my rig into town, not knowing nobody or nothing, and *I'm* the one supposed to be doing the honors on a complete stranger. Now, I know the state decided this is the best way to handle executions, and all, since no one wanted to do hangings any more, and no one could agree on a permanent site for the chair—"

The sheriff held up a finger. "*And* since we sheriffs wanted to keep control over executions in our own counties. Don't forget that."

"I understand that, yes sir—but since we're doing it this way, well, one thing that makes me feel more right about it, is if I get to meet with the client, I mean the prisoner, introduce myself, shake his hand, tell him I'll be doing the best job I know how, ask him if there's anything I can do for him. Let him know I'm there to help him, not to hurt him. You see?"

"What you're there for," the sheriff finally said, "is to *kill* him."

"Well, yes, but not in a mean way. I mean, I like to keep it all as open and above-board as possible. Not anything mysterious or sinister or creepy. Does that make any sense at all?"

The sheriff rubbed a hand across his face. "Yeah, I reckon it does. I'll be frank with you, Mr. Simpson. Executions in this county—well, they ain't always been on the up-and-up like that, if you get my drift."

"I understand."

"It wasn't none of *my* doing, but my predecessor as sheriff, God rest his soul, well, he wan't any too concerned about, you know, legal niceties, or what they thought up in Jackson, or down in Niggertown."

"I know what you mean. That's a bad situation."

"Yes, it is. But since I took over—and the council is with me on this, y'understand, ever last one of 'em, and the preachers too—I've been doing a lot of things different, and they're going to *stay* different. So what you say about being above-board with all your doins, well, that sets well with me. I'm proud to hear you say it."

"I'm glad," Simpson said.

"In fact, I guess I'll go ahead and tell you what I wasn't even going to mention before, since Childress is being so assy and all. But he's been wanting to meet you, too."

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Simpson grinned, an unexpected act that exposed the gaps in his teeth. "Is that a fact?"

"Been asking after you for two solid weeks, and telling us ever day that he's got something to say to you when you roll in. Sounds like y'all maybe got something to talk about."

"I think so. You reckon this afternoon will be all right?"

"How about three o'clock," the sheriff said. He reached for his hat. "No, three-thirty. I got umpteen things to do, and I want to take you up there myself. I hope you'll excuse me for a while."

"Sure thing, Sheriff. I know you want it to go off without a hitch."

"Damn straight I do," the sheriff said, standing up and extending his hand. "Can I count on you, Mr. Simpson?"

"You can, Sheriff," Simpson said. They shook, and Simpson made as if to slide out of the booth.

"No, no, keep your seat. Stay in here where it's cool. I'll leave Deputy Stewart out there at the door, case anybody bothers you, but I don't expect it. You may have to sign a few autographs, I guess." He caught the triumphant glance of Doris, who leaned, arms folded, against the cash register. "Why don't you have you some more tea, or something else sweet? It's on the county. Deputy Stewart will walk you over to Miss Pearce's if you want, or back to the jail. I'll see you at three-thirty."

"I appreciate it, Sheriff. I'll see you later."

"All right, then. Doris, I'll see you."

"See you, Sheriff."

As he passed her, she whispered, "Your deputy said he didn't want none of my pie."

"He's a strong man," the sheriff said, and winked.

Doris already had the tea pitcher in hand, pleased finally to get a chance to work on her back-booth cowboy alone. The pitcher was dripping, beaded with sweat; she blotted it with her hand as she walked, then used her wet finger to draw a curl or two down across her forehead. She glanced at herself in the long mirror: yes, Joan Crawford, exactly, and, like Joan Crawford, not aging a bit. As she approached, her grin faltered, her step slowed. Shit on a griddle, she thought, Gary Cooper's got him a regular fan club. The tall old man approaching the cowboy's booth had been, for the past half-hour, sitting on a stool beside the cash register, sucking on a chocolate shake, and re-reading the menu as if he had never seen one before. How did he get back there so quick? She'd missed his getting up entirely. Well, he wouldn't be talking to the cowboy for long. She'd been around, Doris had, she'd kept her eyes open when she worked the bus-station lunch counter in Meridian, and she thought, forget it, Pops, he don't go that way, a gal can tell. But at that moment, the cowboy glanced up, saw the old man looming over him, and jumped as if he had been sitting in the hot seat himself.

"Mr. Ellis!" the cowboy said.

"Hello, Jimmy," Pops replied. "May I join you?"

Doris stopped in her tracks. Looking pretty damned satisfied with himself, Pops settled into the booth, his black coat bunching up around his shoulders, like a buzzard settling on dinner by the side of the road. The cowboy jerked his head around, looked over the whole cafe, then turned back to the old buzzard and started some fast damn whispering. His eyes hadn't lighted on Doris even for a half-second, any more than if she had been one of

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the soda machines. She whirled and stomped back toward the cash register, toward the old man's milkshake glass, empty but for a brown froth and a crimpled straw. Hell with *him,* Doris resolved. Ain't no lack of *real* men in this town. Let the faggots get their own damn tea!

As he walked alongside Mr. Ellis down Andalusia's main street, Jimmy was conscious of all his failings. The fresh cigarette burn on his wrinkled shirt front. The laborer's pants of thick, faded denim. The scars and the lumps and the schooling he'd missed. His tongue kept finding the skips in his teeth. He could shoot air through those holes as loud as a police whistle, and often he was proud of that, but not today. Mr. Ellis did not walk so much as glide, his hands clasped behind his back, his head thrust forward like the prow of a ship. And beside him was poor old Jimmy, rolling bow-legged down the street like Popeye the Goddamn Sailor Man.

"I can't tell you, Jimmy, how pleased I am finally to make your acquaintance."

"Pleasure's mutual, Mr. Ellis. I've heard a lot about you."

"And I you, Jimmy."

Passers-by stared. The children gave them a wide berth; the men occasionally nodded the silent, unsmiling Southern acknowledgment of mutual manhood, a nod without joy or welcome; the women didn't do that much. Maybe it was just that they were strangers, or that the older man's attire was so out of season, but Jimmy didn't think so.

He tried to keep his mind on the conversation. Mr. Ellis was, after all, his boss—sort of—and Jimmy felt the need to make a good impression. He stepped onto a crumbling edge of the sidewalk, and nearly fell. Swaying, he said:

"I knew I'd meet up with you sometime, and I was looking forward to it. But I don't mind telling you I never thought it would be in Mississippi. I figured I'd see you at one of the meetings, maybe New York or Chicago. Somewhere nearer Canada."

Mr. Ellis tipped his hat to a group of schoolgirls, who huddled closer together, notebooks clutched to their chests. "The meetings have become rather few and far between. I blame the telephone. Certainly guild members don't need each other any less. There will always be technical problems, pay disputes. A sympathetic ear is never out of fashion. But increasingly our business is conducted over the electric lines. Oh, I read all the reports, and I am assured that all the guild's needs are satisfied. But what about isolation? What about the loneliness of the job? How can a telephone alleviate that?"

"Oh, I haven't felt particularly lonely, Mr. Ellis. I'm doing just fine, myself."

"Good. Good." Mr. Ellis stopped to regard a Model-T that had stalled in the middle of the street. Wagons and panel trucks drove around it, and a young woman with Veronica Lake hair perched on the hood, skirt way up past her knees, and waved to the drivers as they passed. Two farmers in overalls were hitching a mule team to the front of the automobile, making slow work of it and watching the girl half the time, and a man in a straw boater and a seersucker suit watched them in silence, jaw set, his furious glances directed equally at the girl, the car, the mules, the farmers, the bright red soupy ankle-deep mud, and the passers-by, including Jimmy.

"Find something else to look at, buddy!" he called across the street. This

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diverted the farmers' attention again. They stood in the wet clay and stared, chains dangling from their hands, as Jimmy and Mr. Ellis walked on.

"She'll find her another ride soon enough, I reckon," Jimmy said.

"More machines," Mr. Ellis said. "Telephones. Motorcars. I am no lover of machines. No machine can do the work of a man, nor should any man entrust his work to a machine."

"No, sir," said Jimmy, who didn't like the turn this was taking.

"Not *entirely,* at any rate," Mr. Ellis added with a smile.

"No, *sir,*" Jimmy said again. It seemed safest.

"I prefer to do guild business in person, when I can. And the most important guild business I do is meeting the new men. Making each one feel welcome and needed and cared for. It's a bit of travel, but I like travel; it broadens. As you should know better than any of us, Jimmy."

Jimmy laughed. "If travel makes a man broader, Mr. Ellis, I reckon I'll be as broad as any man in the guild, by time I retire. I'll be as broad as . . ." He faltered, then blurted: "As a barn."

"I daresay," Mr. Ellis said, rubbing his cheek. Not for the first time, Jimmy noticed the gold ring on Mr. Ellis's left hand.

Jimmy had been fidgeting with his own ring all afternoon, ever since Mr. Ellis slid into the booth. Some days Jimmy remembered to wear the ring, other days he didn't, or just decided not to. He always had avoided jewelry, even in his medicine-show days, when all his colleagues advised him that rings, pendants, necklaces, even hoop earrings, for God's sake, lent credibility to a good hypnotist act. Jimmy had left his days as Dr. Yogi (or Dr. Zogg, or Professor Stingaree) far behind, he hoped, and had not worn jewelry since, until he joined the payroll of the state of Mississippi. With the job came the guild, and with the guild came many things, including the ring that Jimmy was very glad he happened to be wearing today.

Mr. Ellis's finger was swollen on either side of his ring, as if he never took it off. Mr. Ellis reached up with his ring hand and patted Jimmy on the shoulder, startling him.

"You're a rather difficult man to catch up with," Mr. Ellis said. "I wrote to announce my visit, but I take it you didn't get the letter. I'm not sure the guild has your current address?"

"Current as it gets, Mr. Ellis. I reckon I have been living in the truck, pretty much, the last few months. Been a busy time. Twice as many jobs as they predicted when they hired me." Jimmy waited for a response, got none, and continued. "I ain't complaining, mind you, I can use the money and the experience, but I sometimes wonder if the counties ain't going out of their way to drum up business, just to see what the truck looks like."

"How many jobs have you had?"

"Nine, since I started, back in October. But one of them was a doubleheader."

"Beg pardon?"

"Two the same morning."

"I see."

A knot of people stood around a street-corner preacher—a very short one, evidently; his listeners hid him as completely as if they had been a wall. The preacher's voice, thin and piping, carried down the block: "When all this begins to happen, my brothers and sisters, you may be sure that the Kingdom of God is nigh. Oh, it's nigh, all right, my friends, it's nigh and near and bearing down hard!"

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"Twins," Jimmy continued. "How anyone could get that mean at fifteen, I don't know." Jimmy himself had run away from home at fifteen to join the Guard, but there had been no meanness in it. When his mama sent the marshals, he hadn't even fought them. He sighed. "But it ain't my job to know, is it, Mr. Ellis?"

"Certainly not."

"So it's really ten all told, but half of 'em's been this summer, and summer ain't over yet. They keep me jumping, I tell you."

"Your reputation seems to be spreading," Mr. Ellis said. A group of old men on a bench in front of a barbershop abruptly hushed to stare, all except one white-mustached man with a hearing aid plugged into one ear, its cord coiling down his shirt front. He kept talking, loudly: "Well, that's the very man, right there! Don't shush me! If he can hear me from away over there, he's in the wrong line of work, he oughtta be in the Secret Service!" As Jimmy and Mr. Ellis passed, all the old men resumed talking at once, this time with a new note of excitement, and the loud one was submerged once again in the general hubbub. "In fact, I'd say you're something of a celebrity," Mr. Ellis said. "Even a personal bodyguard. I am impressed."

"A bodyguard?" Jimmy looked around. Deputy Stewart was about a half-block behind, hands on hips, elbows out to hog the sidewalk, holsters bouncing against his thighs. Jimmy had told him, back at the cafe, just to go on about his business, he'd see him at the courthouse. He must have been following them all this while. Catching Jimmy's eye, the deputy nodded, smiled. "Oh," Jimmy said. "That's a little embarrassing, frankly." Jimmy dropped his voice to a murmur, even though the deputy was yards away along a busy street. "This sheriff down here is jumpier than a box of cats."

"Indeed?" Mr. Ellis turned and waved at the deputy, who began to wave back, then caught himself and nodded instead.

Jimmy laughed. "I'm pleased you're here, Mr. Ellis."

"Pleased to be here, Jimmy."

"That sheriff. I tell you. You should have seen him, making little notes with his pencil. He's afraid I'm gonna mess up all his fine plans. Hell, he'd do this whole thing without me, if he could."

"But he can't," Mr. Ellis said, with a note of satisfaction.

"No, sir."

Several women peered at them from the window of a clothing store, their faces tense amid the lace and crinoline.

"Do you know, Jimmy, there were members of the guild who wanted to call a meeting just this past year?"

"Is that right?"

"Yes. A matter came up that caused some of the members great concern. They felt the guild should take a public stand—and a public stand is a very rare thing for the guild, a very rare thing indeed."

"Yes, sir."

"But we on the board decided that the wiser course of action would be to monitor the situation. Do you know why I tell you about this?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"The issue that so concerned the guild, Jimmy, was you."

Jimmy stopped dead, while Mr. Ellis walked on. "Me!"

The older man looked around, smiled. "I'm sorry. I misspoke. The concern was not with *you,* specifically. Your name was not even known to us at the

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time." He waited for Jimmy to catch up. "No, Jimmy, the guild's concern was with your *job*."

"I don't understand."

"The guild's officers subscribe to an excellent clipping service. It is the one your Mr. Mencken uses. When the Mississippi legislature debated the purchasing of a mobile electric chair, and the hiring of a traveling executioner to maintain and operate it, we followed the accounts with the greatest interest. The public debate was paralleled by a private one, among the members of the guild. Not about the chair per se; that debate was settled more than forty years ago. But a *mobile* chair, being driven from town to town . . . well. There were those who considered your job a giant step backward, a return to the days of executions as public spectacles. Whoever took the job would be in a spotlight that no guild member had suffered in fifty years, and would find himself, wittingly or not, made a symbol, a spokesman for our entire unique profession. Do you understand our concerns, Jimmy?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose I do. But you said y'all decided not to get involved."

They had reached the northwest corner of the courthouse square. Twenty or more townspeople, mostly older men, but a few children as well, sauntered around the tarpaulin-draped truck, chatting with the two deputies on guard. One deputy sat on the front bumper, fanned himself with his hat. The courthouse lawn was dotted with women who sat on the grass, tending toddlers and infants. Several young men in rolled-up shirtsleeves lounged against the Confederate monument, smoking. Jimmy watched Mr. Ellis take all this in. After a few moments, the older man sighed.

"Better to risk one celebrity, the board reasoned, than to drag the entire guild into the newspapers." He cast Jimmy a sorrowful glance. "The newspapers have seldom been respectful of our membership."

Jimmy nodded. That was true enough. At least his mama hadn't seen the articles in the Jackson paper, and the one in the *American Mercury,* the one that said Jimmy had to be "helped from one barroom to another" after a job. Shit. Smartass Yankee reporter hadn't even picked up the tab.

"When my predecessor, God rest him, died by his own hand," Mr. Ellis continued, "the newspapers in Canada treated the affair shamefully, Jimmy. Shamefully."

Jimmy had heard something about this. "He cut his own throat, didn't he?"

Mr. Ellis nodded, tight-lipped. It was less a nod than a sudden jerk of the head. "In life, Mr. Ellis was such a private man, yet in death, his entire biography, his every foible and human fault, was placed on public exhibit, scrutinized as one would scrutinize the wrinkles of a madman's brain. After decades of devoted public service, *this* was his reward. Ah, well." Mr. Ellis gazed at the truck.

"Mr. Ellis?" Jimmy asked, confused.

"Eh?"

"You called him Mr. Ellis," Jimmy said, gently.

"Oh. Yes," he said, looking at Jimmy, blinking his way back to the present, and smiling. "The name goes with the job. Less a name than, well, a sort of title. His predecessor was Mr. Ellis before him. And so on and so forth. It is the custom in Canada, you see."

"I see," Jimmy repeated, though he wasn't sure he did. He tried to imagine the man with his job fifty years down the road, still answering to the name Jimmy Simpson. He couldn't see it. He could see the truck, though. Cheap-ass state would keep the same truck that long, at least.

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"Ah, well. History. Where was I? Your case, of course. The board voted for caution, for public silence, and for continued monitoring of the situation."

From the courthouse came a *bang*. When everyone looked up, the sheriff was already past the steps and striding down the walk, the brass front door slowly swinging to behind him. His face was grim. The townsmen began to back away from the truck. The deputy on the bumper stood up quick and jammed his hat back on.

"Y'all get away from that truck!" the sheriff barked. "No, not *you two,* for God's sake! Go on, now, people."

Jimmy turned back to the older man and quietly asked: "And how did *you* vote, Mr. Ellis?"

Mr. Ellis's silence seemed longer than it was. Jimmy heard the sheriff and the deputies scolding the younguns: "Y'all stop messing with that tarp, now. They ain't nothing to see." When Mr. Ellis finally looked around, shoulders back, somehow taller than he had been, his thick lenses caught the sun so that his eyes were hidden.

"I cast the deciding vote, Jimmy. In the past thirty-five years, I have hanged three hundred and eighty-seven people, ranging in age from twelve to seventy-three, twenty-two of them women. More than twice as many as the Mr. Ellis before me. I have hanged people in British Columbia and in Newfoundland, in log cabins and stone fortresses, on permanent scaffolds and on planks laid across railroad trestles. I have heard last words in English, French, Acadian, Inuit, and a dozen other languages and dialects, including some known only to God. Three hundred and eighty-seven, Jimmy. Within the guild, I cast many deciding votes."

The sheriff was upon them, red-faced and scowling at Mr. Ellis. "Do I know you, sir?" he asked. As he spoke, Deputy Stewart trotted up to the group; he replied to the sheriff's glance with a shrug.

Jimmy cleared his throat. "Sheriff Davis, this is Mr. Ellis. Mr. Ellis, Sheriff Davis. Mr. Ellis is a, well, he's a—" Everyone looked at Jimmy. "A colleague of mine. From Canada."

"Colleague, eh? I didn't think you needed an assistant."

"Oh, no, it ain't like that. He's here to—"

"Here simply to visit my young friend Jimmy, and to learn firsthand how things are done in other parts of the world."

The sheriff looked at him without encouragement.

"Mr. Ellis would like to join us this afternoon. I told him that was okay with me—if it's okay with you, of course."

"My interest, Sheriff, is purely a professional one, and you may rely upon my rectitude and my decorum."

"Lord God," the sheriff said. "Mr. Ellis, I take it you have some experience in these matters."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Ellis said, managing to sound both proud and regretful.

The sheriff sucked at his back teeth. "Well, I can use all the experience I can get. All right, Mr. Ellis, you can go on up with us, and welcome."

"I thank you, sir."

"Assuming you still want to meet with the prisoner, Mr. Simpson."

"Sure thing, Sheriff."

"All right, then. Stewart, you keep to the square, and don't miss anything."

"I won't, Sheriff."

"And don't waste time talking to no gals."

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"I won't, Sheriff," Stewart said, less happily.

"Follow me, gentlemen." The sheriff headed for the courthouse door. As they fell in behind, the sheriff asked, without looking around, "You get enough to eat awhile ago, Mr. Simpson?"

"I'm full as a tick, Sheriff."

"That's good. We *will* feed you in this town, if we can't do nothing else." He held the door open. The lobby was marginally cooler than the outdoors, and much darker, with strange acoustics; their shoes clattered on the marble floor like hooves. "Mrs. Pearce will do you up right, you'll see. Where you staying, Mr. Ellis?"

Mr. Ellis only stared at him, and Jimmy, feeling uncomfortably like the man's translator, scratched the side of his face and murmured, "Sheriff, uh, Mr. Ellis don't like people to know where he stays."

"I see," the sheriff said, regarding Mr. Ellis anew. The old man's dark clothes practically melted into the shadows, leaving his pale, sagging face looking alone and abandoned. "Well, I'm proud to meet a private man. Here's the stairs. They're right steep, I'm afraid, Mr. Ellis. We're due to have an Otis put in next fiscal year."

Mr. Ellis smiled in reply and gestured grandly. "After you, gentlemen."

On the way up, the sheriff stooped to snatch a Nabs wrapper from the floor of the landing. As he climbed, he folded the crinkling paper into a tiny square. "Look at this mess," he muttered. "Old Hugh ain't been in to clean today, I don't guess. Can't say as I blame him." Hearing no footsteps behind, Jimmy glanced around, but there was Mr. Ellis's pale face bobbing up the darkened stairwell. It smiled at Jimmy, and winked.

The preceding Mr. Ellis had turned to his apprentice, on the young man's first night of work, and said to him:

"Keep your face expressionless, no matter what happens. Speak only when you have to. Keep your eyes open, so that you don't miss anything important. Do everything as quickly and efficiently as possible. And don't think about it. Not beforehand, and not while it's happening, and not after. Our job is necessary, son, but it can't stand too much thinking."

Thinking nothing, missing nothing, Mr. Ellis walked down the second-floor corridor that was the only cell block in Andalusia County, Mississippi. All his senses were engaged; these men would be surprised to know how many. Jimmy, the sheriff, and the deputy all had their backs to him. Before they reached the dead end, Mr. Ellis slid from his overcoat pocket a cherry jawbreaker and popped it into his mouth. It bloomed on his tongue as he looked through the bars at the diminutive, sour-faced Negro within. *Don't give me lip you little bastard Help me with this wagon boy Ferris is more a man than you'll ever be.* A few seconds' concentration, and then Childress' memories were gone, rebuffed. Or, perhaps, suppressed; the effect was the same. The tang in Mr. Ellis's mouth helped him block, for some reason. He'd figured that out himself. The previous Mr. Ellis had smoked. Jimmy would resort to his own device, eventually.

These particular jawbreakers were hard to find in Canada. He'd have to stock up.

"Here's the man you been wanting to see, Childress."

Jimmy stuck his arm through the bars and offered his hand. "Brother, my name is Jimmy Simpson. I'm the man who'll be in charge tomorrow."

Childress looked wary, but after a few seconds he shook Jimmy's hand.

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"Brother, they tell me you had the choice of the rope or the chair, and you picked the chair. Is that right?"

After another pause, Childress nodded. Wrong, Mr. Ellis thought.

"Well, I appreciate that, Brother, I surely do. Let me tell you that you made the right choice, because I'm a professional, and I know what I'm doing. I'm going to do a nice clean job, as quick and trouble-free as any man could do. You don't have to worry about nothing on my end. No mistakes, no delays. And I swear to God, Brother, you won't feel a thing. So you can stop worrying about my end of it, Brother, and focus on what's important, on Jesus and His mercy and on the better place you'll be in by this time tomorrow. I guess that's all I got to say, Brother, except to repeat that you're in good hands with me. I'm gonna give you the most trouble-free, easeful passing a man could ask for. You've put your confidence in me, and I appreciate it. I'm here to tell you I ain't gonna let you down."

After a long pause, Childress ticked his eyes over toward the sheriff.

"You're kidding," Childress said.

"No, sir," Jimmy said. "No jokes here. I'm telling you straight up, the way I tell all the men I work with."

Childress' eyes had ticked back to Jimmy when he started speaking. Now, after a beat, they ticked over to Mr. Ellis. "Who *you,* then?" he asked. "The undertaker?"

"Not at all," Mr. Ellis said, removing his hat. Like so many sweet-toothed people, he could talk fluently with all manner of candy in his mouth. "My name is Mr. Ellis. I will be assisting Mr. Simpson. And you may expect the highest degree of professionalism from me as well."

Childress stopped looking at anybody. His eyes were focused inward. The corners of his mouth twitched, held, and the beginnings of a smile crept across his face. As the grin widened, Jimmy turned to the sheriff and whispered: "A kind word does wonders, as my mama says. Look at that. Does my heart good, it does." Now Childress was laughing faintly, mostly in the form of air sliding through his teeth, *sss sss sss.* "I'm always pleased to be able to calm some poor soul's last hours," Jimmy said, sounding unsure. Childress laughed louder and louder. His shoulders shook, he bobbed his head, he gripped his knees. His eyes were wide.

"Ha ha ha HAAAAA!" Childress wheezed. He was out of breath. "Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord have mercy, I can't stop laughing! Ha ha ha! Oh, you poor old cracker. You poor old stupid fucker."

"Shut up, Childress!" the sheriff said, raking his club across the bars.

"Poor old cut-up snaggle-tooth bowlegged peckerwood. Oh, Lord, that's funny!"

"What you mean, funny?"

"Don't listen to him, Mr. Simpson. Let's go."

"No, I want to know. What's so funny? What's so funny about what I said?"

Childress shut off the laughter like water from a new tap. "I'll *tell* you what's funny, you dumbass cracker shit! I'll tell you what I been wanting to tell you all these weeks. The sheriff here ain't got a big enough dick to drag me off in the woods and cut me up and throw me on the pile with the *other* niggers—"

"Be quiet!" the sheriff roared, flailing on the bars with his club.

"—so he goes and hires a poor old dumbass white boy to do his lynching *for* him. And the dumbass don't even know it!"

Mr. Ellis stood very still. His predecessor's face had betrayed nothing,

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right up until the end. He was a good model, and Mr. Ellis was a worthy successor.

"*I'll* shut his face," the deputy snarled, jamming the key into the lock. The sheriff shoved him in the chest so hard he fell back across the narrow corridor, arms flailing. "Shit!" he cried, gasping. The sheriff pointed his club at the deputy's mouth.

"Stay over there," he said.

"Where's your white hood and white robe, white boy?" Childress asked. "In the truck with your bucket of nigger balls?"

When the supervisor is incapacitated, the apprentice must act. Mr. Ellis was surprised at how naturally he fell back into the subordinate role. He tugged Jimmy's sleeve. "No more to be done here, Jimmy. Please. *Please,* Jimmy."

Jimmy stared at Childress. "You talking to the wrong man," he whispered.

"I'm talking to the man what's come to *kill* me. You see anyone *else* here that wants to do it?"

"But I don't—" Mr. Ellis grabbed Jimmy's arm and yanked so hard that Jimmy stumbled sideways. The sheriff took Jimmy's other arm, and the two big men hustled him down the corridor.

"Wait," Jimmy said. "Wait, please, fellas, I want to talk to him! I want to *explain* to him!"

"Hooper, you better be right behind us!" the sheriff yelled.

"You bet I am," the deputy muttered.

The four men burst into the sheriff's office, where two other deputies were just coming in from the stairs, demanding to know what the commotion was.

"Nat, Archie, get that corridor door locked and keep it locked. The next person gets in to see Childress is me taking him downstairs in the morning. You understand? I'm tired of this shit."

"Who'd come visit Childress anyway?" one of the deputies asked, slamming and locking the door to the cells. "Some nigger preacher, maybe?"

"I don't care if *Jesus* comes a-knocking," the sheriff said, slumping back onto his desk, hairs plastered to his forehead. Papers cascaded onto the floor. "Mr. Simpson, you all right?"

Jimmy nodded. He had fallen back onto a swaybacked sofa, hands pressed against his forehead, eyes screwed shut.

"Mr. Ellis," the sheriff said, "I thank you for your help in there."

Mr. Ellis nodded. His chest hurt. He had swallowed his jawbreaker.

The sheriff turned to the deputy he had punched, who stood in the corner, arms crossed, glaring. "Hooper, I'm sorry. You can come over here and give me your best shot. I reckon you got the right."

The deputy pursed his lips. "No, sir," he said. "No, sir, I think I'll take me a walk. *Alone!*" he barked to the deputy who tried to accompany him, who fell back, looking hurt, as Hooper slammed through the door. His footsteps tumbled downstairs.

"How many more hours, Lord?" the sheriff said. He hunched himself backward to sit on the desk, dislodging more papers and a coffee can of pencils that he caught at and missed. As deputies dived for the rolling pencils, the sheriff rested his feet on a swivel chair. "If it weren't for those crowds out there, I swear I think I'd do it this afternoon and be done."

Jimmy spoke, sounding shaken but steady, like a man who no longer has

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the urge to cry. "Ain't got set up yet." He opened his eyes, braced himself on the sofa with his hands, leaned forward and sighed. "Takes time, Sheriff. Can't be rushed."

"The chair," the sheriff repeated. "Oh, the chair. Sure, sure."

He looked at Mr. Ellis, whose calloused fingers itched. The sheriff had a pleading look, a look Mr. Ellis had seen before. Mr. Ellis would not think about that today. Instead he smiled, patted Jimmy on the shoulder. What a debacle. "No harm done," he said.

"Who's Ferris?" Jimmy asked.

Mr. Ellis froze.

The sheriff frowned. "Ferris? That's the man Childress killed. Buddy Ferris. Why? Who said anything about Ferris?"

"Didn't someone—" Jimmy stopped, shook his head. "Oh, never mind."

So Jimmy was starting early. "Never mind, indeed," Mr. Ellis said, quickly. "Random invective, nothing more." He patted Jimmy's shoulder again. Jimmy was young, strong. He would adjust. "Sticks and stones," Mr. Ellis said. He'd *have* to. A pencil had rolled to a stop against Mr. Ellis's foot. The eraser was missing, and someone had gnawed off the paint.

At first glance, as four groaning deputies wrestled it off the back of the truck at midnight, the chair seemed enormous, the throne of a giant-king. Arms, legs, and back were thick oaken blocks, more suited for ceiling beams than furniture. Later, in the floodlighted courthouse basement, Mr. Ellis realized the chair's seat was surprisingly narrow. The average department-store Father Christmas would find it a tight fit.

The chair's platform was carried in separately, by a single little bow-legged deputy who shrugged off assistance, obviously glad to have nothing to do with the chair. The platform, a square five feet to a side, was made of sawmill-yellow two-by-fours covered by a stapled-down rubber mat ribbed like the mat inside a bathtub.

As the deputies maneuvered the chair, the ceiling lights played inside the metal headpiece, a shallow bowl cocked back on a coiled metal stand that reared above the entire contraption like a cobra. After bolting the chair down, Jimmy's next move was to untangle and plug in the fat black electrical cords that fed the machine. One snaked from the helmet to the portable generator, which Jimmy had insisted on carrying in himself. ("That chair ain't gone break even if you drop it, but this generator, why it'll go queer on you if you look at it hard.") A second cord connected the helmet to the base of the chair; a third led from the left leg of the chair to the wall socket. Finding this socket caused a few bad moments, until someone thought to look behind the Christmas decorations. Fortunately, only the baby Jesus box had to be shoved out of the way. Roaches scattered. Jimmy blew dust from the socket before shoving in the plug.

The deputies who had carried the chair were trying not to breathe too visibly. "Why do you need the wall socket at all?" asked the slowest to recover, red-faced, hands on knees. "I mean, you got the generator."

"The socket ain't for current going *in*," Jimmy said. "The socket's for current going *out*. It's gotta go *somewhere*. Less'n you want it," he added, yanking the plug from the wall and holding it out to the deputy with a grin.

They all laughed.

Mr. Ellis sensed the edge beneath the jape. All these bystanders, their jobs done, were making Jimmy nervous.

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He cleared his throat—startling a couple of men who apparently had forgotten his presence—and said: "Mr. Simpson, is there any further assistance these gentlemen can render at this time?"

"I don't reckon so, Mr. Ellis," Jimmy said. "But I do appreciate all the help, fellows. I'll commend you all to the sheriff, I surely will."

With a slight bow, Mr. Ellis began herding them toward the stairs. "If you'll excuse us, gentlemen. Making ready the . . . *instrument* is a delicate matter, one that requires concentration and solitude." He very nearly had said *gallows,* from force of habit. "I'm sure you all understand."

They grumbled, but they went. The last one looked back and called to Jimmy. "Two of us will be at the top of the stairs. You need anything, just holler."

"I appreciate it," Jimmy said, not looking around.

Mr. Ellis smiled and shut the door on the deputies. Through the metal, he could hear one of them mutter, "Who's he think he is, Arthur Treacher?" He waited, expecting to hear a padlock clank into place, but heard only footsteps ascending.

"You're good at that," Jimmy said, fussing with the generator.

"Practice," Mr. Ellis said. "How may I help you?" He placed his hands in the small of his back, and awaited instructions.

Jimmy looked up, a fleck of grease on his nose. "Just your being here is a help, Mr. Ellis. But you reckon you can fetch me a bucket of water?"

While Jimmy unloaded his carpetbag, Mr. Ellis cleaned out the junk in the corner sink sufficiently to wedge a bucket beneath the spigot. He was careful not to slop any on his return trip. He found Jimmy kneeling amid sponges, straps, and tools. Next Mr. Ellis soaked the sponges and wrung them out, handing them to Jimmy to affix to the chair. At first he used too much water, but Jimmy showed him that the sponges needed to be merely damp, not dripping, and after that, the work went better.

That done, Jimmy rolled up his sleeves and said: "Take off your coat, and have a seat."

The chair's angles had looked severe, but Mr. Ellis found himself actually reclining a bit. The padded headrest gave pleasantly. Two shallow depressions in the wooden seat contoured themselves to his buttocks, and the small metal drain beneath his coccyx wasn't noticeable. He felt something cold in the small of his back, so he sat forward and looked around. The damp circle on his shirt corresponded to the glistening metal disk in the base of the back of the chair. The disk was the size of a saucer in a child's tea set. "The body electrode," Jimmy said. "That's the first sponge you did. Probably still a little wetter than it needs to be."

"Is that a problem?"

"Oh, no," Jimmy said. "Not less it's uncomfortable for you."

"Not at all." He sighed and sat back, ignoring the spreading dampness behind. He rested his elbows on the chair's broad arms. Mr. Ellis had a long-standing grudge against most chairs, especially hotel-room chairs, because the arms often seemed too high, but these were just right.

Jimmy had been watching with a smile on his creased face. "What do you think?"

"It's quite comfortable," Mr. Ellis replied. "Frankly, I'm surprised."

"Oh, yeah, it's a good-sitting chair. Nobody believes me, at first. You'd be surprised how many folks I meet want to sit in it. Women, especially."

Mr. Ellis had snagged his right coat sleeve on the bolt that held the wrist strap. "Ah, indeed?" he asked as he worked the fabric loose.

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"Oh, yeah. Pretty young gals, they always want to sit in it." He winked. "I let 'em, too."

Mr. Ellis chose to say nothing.

"The original design had a footrest on it," Jimmy said, disappearing behind the chair to the right, "but it never got added for some reason. Budget cuts, I reckon. Hold still, now, please, sir." He walked back into view holding the free end of a foot-wide leather strap. He moved quickly around the chair from right to left and disappeared, pulling the strap tight against Mr. Ellis's chest. "That ain't too tight, is it?"

Mr. Ellis breathed, watching the heave of his breastbone, and replied, "No, it's fine." He tried leaning forward, and couldn't. He thought he could move a little from side to side, though, and was succeeding in the experiment when Jimmy reappeared, walking this time from left to right and carrying the free end of a second foot-wide strap. "Uh-uh," Jimmy said, grinning. "None of *that,* now." As the second strap pulled tight around his middle, Mr. Ellis involuntarily sucked in his stomach and was vexed to find that he couldn't push it out again. He sighed, tried to inch sideways, and failed. "Still comfortable?" Jimmy asked, stepping back into view.

"Not as much, no, but tolerable."

"You want the straps tight, believe me," Jimmy said. "I mean, if this wasn't a rehearsal. If this was the real show."

Wincing at the word *show,* Mr. Ellis again chose to say nothing.

Jimmy then fastened the straps across Mr. Ellis's upper arms, wrists, and ankles. He tugged on each strap, working deftly and quickly, asking each time whether the fit was okay. Then Jimmy knelt and said, "Now let me roll up your pant legs just a little."

"Are you this solicitous with all your clients?"

"I don't talk to 'em, no, but I try to make 'em as comfortable as I can. There, now." Mr. Ellis felt the padding clamp his left shin, the metal disc cold and damp against his flesh. "That too tight? Good. The right leg, now. No need making this any worse than it has to be, right?"

"Exactly right," Mr. Ellis said, pleased. "That is the essence of our creed, Jimmy. The guild has taught you well."

Jimmy looked up with a grin, but his face fell. "What's wrong, Mr. Ellis? Oh, hell, this right one's too tight, ain't it? No problem. A lot of men have one leg thicker'n t'other. It's one of those everyday deformities. Hold on a sec."

"No, the fit is fine," Mr. Ellis said. "I just was wondering . . ."

"Yes, sir?" He remained on his knees, his face almost boyishly earnest.

"During the actual preparations," Mr. Ellis asked, "wouldn't the client be blindfolded?"

Jimmy hung his head. "Well, yes, sir, sure he would. I mean, he'd have on the black mask. But I hated to do that to you, since it ain't necessary tonight, and all."

Mr. Ellis felt a flash of anger. "Jimmy," he said, firmly, and the younger man looked up again. "If you are to test this apparatus, and this procedure, you need to do so *fully.* Otherwise, I am no help to you."

"Yes, *sir,*" Jimmy said, duckwalking over to his carpetbag and pulling out a folded square of fabric. Its buckle clinked against the concrete as Jimmy unfastened it. "You're right, yes, sir."

Mr. Ellis swallowed and took the deepest breath he could manage. "I am no tourist, Jimmy. I am no 'pretty young gal' to be coddled and impressed."

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Jimmy lifted his eyeglasses off his face. "I am a fellow member of the guild, here to help you ensure that this operation is carried out—" He inclined his head slightly as Jimmy tugged the black hood over his eyes. "—with one hundred percent efficiency."

"You're absolutely right, sir," said Jimmy's muffled voice as it moved behind the chair. "I swear, usually I put on the mask right after the chest strap, second thing. Wouldn't do for the client to be able to watch all my rigmarole, now would it?" The strap at the base of the hood pulled tight across Mr. Ellis's chin, forcing his jaw backward. Startled, he lifted his chin so that the strap fell against his neck. It continued to tighten as Mr. Ellis reared his head as far back into the rubber cushion as possible. Just as he thought *He's going to strangle me,* the strap loosened a bit. He heard Jimmy buckle it into place. He sighed, and felt his hot reflected breath. The mask was porous enough, but it sucked in when he inhaled. He wished he could tilt his head forward, but the neck strap wouldn't allow that. He managed to tease a bit of lint off his lower lip with the tip of his tongue. A hiss, and it was gone.

"Time for the helmet now, sir." Mr. Ellis flinched as he felt Jimmy's fingertips beneath his chin. "Chin up for me just a little? There you go." Mr. Ellis tried to refocus as Jimmy bustled about. He heard water being dipped. "The helmet has a sponge in it, too, sir, so don't be surprised."

"I won't be," Mr. Ellis said. Something soft, cold, and wet pressed down on the top of his head, and he flinched again. "Sorry."

"No problem," Jimmy said. "Most folks jump more'n that. Got this one a little wet myself, I'm afraid." Cold water trickled down Mr. Ellis's right cheek to the corner of his mouth. Salty. A second runnel flowed down the back of his neck, beneath his collar, and seeped into his shirt between his shoulder blades. Mr. Ellis shivered without moving his body, a disagreeable sensation. Jimmy straightened the mask with both hands while the sponge continued to press down atop Mr. Ellis's head, as if held by a third hand. "It's the damnedest part of the business, sometimes, getting the water just right," Jimmy muttered. "Oh, well. Better too much water than not enough, believe me. How's the helmet feel? Too tight?"

"Not at all," Mr. Ellis replied. He shivered again, and hoped he wouldn't catch cold. Being able only to hear Jimmy as he moved about, his voice swooping, made Mr. Ellis uneasy. "What are you doing now?" he asked.

"Just double-checking the straps, electrodes, connections. You can't be too careful, you know."

"Yes, I know."

Jimmy's voice was farther away. "Voltmeter's at two thousand. All right, then. Ready?"

Mr. Ellis wasn't sure how to respond. "Ready for what?" he asked.

"The switch. It's kinda loud."

Mr. Ellis considered. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm—" He was interrupted by a metallic clash, like the coupling of railroad cars. As the echoes died, Mr. Ellis relaxed and found that he somehow had lifted himself an inch or so off the chair.

"I oil that switch and *oil* it," Jimmy said, his voice coming closer, "and I can't make it no quieter. At least it don't creak like it used to. Used to sound like the goddamn Inner Sanctum." The sponge lifted from Mr. Ellis's head. The neck strap loosened with a clink. Just as Mr. Ellis drew a breath, the cloth rustled past his face. Jimmy held the blank black hood aloft.

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"Pee-pye," Jimmy said. "That's what Mama used to say when I was little. Other younguns always said peek-a-boo, but I've said pee-pye ever since. Your glasses, sir."

They had been riding in Jimmy's shirt pocket. When Mr. Ellis put them on, they sat crooked.

"Here, lemme get those straps undone. I sure do appreciate your helping me out, Mr. Ellis. I still got to run some tests on the generator, but I feel a lot better knowing the chair's ready to go. This'll make things a heap faster in the morning."

"How long does the preparation normally take?" Mr. Ellis asked, flexing his stomach as the strap peeled away.

"Shouldn't be more'n one flat minute from the time the client walks through that door to the throwing of the switch. With you I took a lot longer, to explain things and to check everything two and three times. I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not." He stood and stretched.

Jimmy squatted beside the carpetbag, made a show of rummaging, and said, without looking up: "Mr. Ellis."

"Yes, Jimmy."

"What do you think of all that this afternoon?"

Hands on hips, Mr. Ellis took a deep breath. "Mr. Childress is an angry man, Jimmy."

"Huh!"

"And he has reason for anger, in his own eyes. The sheriff does not. Nor do the deputies. Nor do you."

Jimmy looked up. "What do you mean?"

Mr. Ellis sighed. "I was *there,* Jimmy. I saw your reaction. You held it in check, to your credit, but you felt it nonetheless."

Looking at the floor, Jimmy said, "I wanted to kill him."

Mr. Ellis felt his shoulders sag, his knees spasm. He sat down in the chair. He started to lean back, then remembered the clammy sponge and leaned forward, elbows on knees, his fingers lightly interlaced. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that is the danger, isn't it?" He sorted words. "There is always danger in meeting the client beforehand. Always."

"They warned me against it," Jimmy mumbled. "From the first."

"Yes. We . . . *traditionalists* avoid it, at all costs. It causes confusion. The client's emotions are so forceful as to be, shall we say, contagious. One either wants to spare the client, or otherwise . . . loses perspective."

"I couldn't help it!" Jimmy cried out. Moving more quickly than Mr. Ellis could have imagined, he snatched up a pair of pliers and cast them backhanded into the corner. They crashed against the faucet and clattered into the sink. "It was like he was inside my head!" Jimmy said, balance regained in squatting position. Fingertips touched the floor to left and right. Muscles roped his arms, corded his neck. "But he don't belong there. He *don't.*" He stared at Mr. Ellis. "He don't know me at all."

"Of course not," said Mr. Ellis, motionless.

In a quieter voice, Jimmy said, "I ain't a lyncher."

"Of course not," said Mr. Ellis.

"I ain't had a privileged life," Jimmy said. "I reckon you can tell that by how I talk, how I act. And I ain't always been the most law-abiding citizen. Hell, I'm from Thompson County, from the piney woods. That says it right there. You probably heard about Thompson County clear up your way, even."

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Mr. Ellis smiled. "We have our own such places."

"You know what I mean, then. Drank myself blind. Busted heads. Shot a man in the belly for talking nasty to my mama. He crawled into the ditch like a crab. I went squalling to the doctor. Man was so grateful he lied and said he'd shot himself. Last I heard, he was in Memphis, waiting tables at the Peabody Hotel. Ain't that something? Making big tips. I was fourteen."

"You learned your lesson," Mr. Ellis said.

"That truck job, I was so drunk, I don't know *what* I was thinking. But Governor Hugh White pardoned me in 1939. I got the letter in the glove compartment to read now and then. Spelled my name wrong, but meant well. He recommended me for this job. He's a fine Christian man."

"I'm sure he is," Mr. Ellis said.

"But I never been part of the things Childress is talking about." He added, in a whisper: "*Thinking* about." He shuddered. "No, Childress don't know me."

"Childress," Mr. Ellis said, "is a layman." He pointed to himself and Jimmy. "We are professionals. We know the truth of what we do. Don't we?" A pause. "*Don't we?*"

Perhaps it was too stern, too quick. Mr. Ellis held his breath. Jimmy sighed and slid backward on his haunches to sit on the floor. "Yes, sir," he said, massaging his arms. Callouses and scars slid together with the sound of sandpaper.

Mr. Ellis allowed himself to relax. Some days, he felt he had outlived his usefulness. Some days, not. In a gentler voice, he said, "You will not get any less sensitive to the client's emotions, Jimmy. As the years pass, as you gain . . . experience, you'll become even *more* attuned. A lot more. You must always fight it, Jimmy. You must maintain your self-control. Hence the creed. Have you forgotten your creed, Jimmy?"

Startled: "No, sir!"

"I'm glad. Begin."

Jimmy glanced around. "Here?"

Mr. Ellis slapped the armrest twice. "Yes, *here,* exactly! Please. Begin."

Jimmy cleared his throat, rubbed his neck with both hands, took a deep breath, and recited:

"I am neither judge nor jury.
I am their instrument,
Their right hand,
Their Will given life—"

"Good," Mr. Ellis interrupted. "Very good. There is strength in those words. *Neither judge nor jury.* Never forget that, my boy. Never forget that."

"I won't, sir. Thank you, sir."

Mr. Ellis smiled and asked, "Have you learned only the English?"

Jimmy grinned as he stood. He swatted dust from his pants. "So far, yes, sir. That other version, I don't know, it's hard to get my mouth around."

"Keep at it. You'll get it eventually. Much correspondence among the board members is transacted entirely in the ancient tongue of the guild."

"Like the Masons."

"Hardly," Mr. Ellis said, offended. "Europe needed *us* thousands of years before it needed cathedrals!"

As Jimmy removed the sponges and toweled the metal parts dry, Mr. Ellis sat, rested, enjoyed the businesslike movement around him. No wasted energy, this boy, once the fit passed. A good lad, all in all. Dedicated. Much

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yet to learn, of course, before he could be entrusted with the higher levels, the higher duties. How had he, Mr. Ellis, proven himself for the ultimate duty, so many years before? He'd never been sure. Certainly he had upheld the highest standards of the guild, but just as certainly, his predecessor had seen in him something more. Something like a pair of pliers slung across the room. Something quick, and feral.

"How about you?" Jimmy asked.

Mr. Ellis started. "I beg your pardon?"

Jimmy had a slight smile on his creased face. "How many times have you met a client beforehand?"

Mr. Ellis relaxed. "Ah, Jimmy. We both are too easily read for this work. Once. Only once, and that many years ago. Quite early on, really." He laughed, sat up straight on the edge of the chair, hands on his knees. "Very different circumstances."

"How different?"

Mr. Ellis hesitated, decided he had no reason to hesitate, and continued: "It was in Moose Jaw. Much like Andalusia, only louder, colder. I was much younger, much more sure of myself. The evening before the event, all was ready in the square. I received a note at the hotel, from the principal keeper at the jail, that the condemned man desired to see me. Unprecedented. I couldn't fathom what the man might want. But I had dined well, quail with fennel, and had allowed myself a glass of port after, and I had my feet at the grate and the *Times* in my lap, only two days old; quite current by Canadian standards. I was happy with my lot in life. So when the note arrived, I felt both curious and generous. I donned my shoes and my coat and accompanied the messenger to the jail. The unfortunate man was sitting on his cot, sleepless, of course, as Mr. Childress no doubt is, at this moment, and when we appeared, he stood and walked very near the bars, regarded me intently. A squat man, Indian, Mohawk unless I miss my guess. The keeper said, 'Do you know who this fellow is? This is Mr. Ellis, whom you were asking for, and he left his warm fire to come out and have a word with you.' The prisoner nodded but said nothing. I said, 'Hello,' feeling awkward, and I smiled, and then I asked, 'What did you want to see me about?' He replied, 'I just wanted to see what you looked like.' I nodded and did a foolish thing. I stepped back and turned about for him, as if modeling my suit. Imagine the cheek! I'm ashamed to recall that, now. The port in me, I suppose. Then I asked: 'Well? Now that you've seen me, what do you think of me?' And the prisoner said, 'I think you're just what I deserve. I'm going to be hanged by the ugliest son of a bitch in Saskatchewan!'"

Jimmy laughed. "You're shitting me!" he cried.

"I *never* shit," Mr. Ellis said. "In the sense you mean. Oh, it was a chastened man who returned to his fireside that night, you can well imagine!"

Mr. Ellis's face began to fall as Jimmy continued to laugh. "I'll bet you were," Jimmy said. "Oh, boy!"

"He was silent on the scaffold," Mr. Ellis said. "I was told later those were his last words."

He stood, faced the younger man, close enough to feel Jimmy's last breath before he held it.

"From his height and weight, I knew he would require a four-foot drop. Berry's formula is quite precise, you know."

He barely touched Jimmy's jaw with his fingertips.

"I placed the noose so that it fell this way," he said, tracing the line, "with

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the knot here, beneath the angle of the left jaw. When he dropped, his chin went back, so." He tipped Jimmy's chin up. "Breaking his spinal cord and his first three vertebrae."

Jimmy kept his chin tipped up as Mr. Ellis stepped back.

"No lacerations. No pain. Death was instantaneous. What the editorial writers and the legislators don't know, *cannot* know, is that in the proper hands, hanging is an exact science. Speedy. Certain. That Mohawk was in the right hands. I did my job well. As you will do *yours,* tomorrow." He patted the younger man's shoulder. "As you will do yours." He smiled, and Jimmy smiled, first tentatively, then broadly, head still tilted slightly back. They were standing that way when the stairwell door slammed open.

"I hope that damned murderer ain't getting any more sleep than I am," the sheriff said. "What y'all doing in here, anyhow? Dancing?"

Mr. Ellis's fingers were cold and wet. He could not seem to dry them no matter how many times he applied the towel. He draped the yellow daffodil print across the back of the folding chair, raised one hand to his mouth as if to cough, and flicked out his tongue. Salt. He thought he felt the granules as he rubbed his fingers together. Perhaps it was imagination. Perhaps he should stop fretting about it.

Mr. Ellis was conscious of the stares of the sheriff, the deputies, the doctor, the witnesses. The folding chairs were stenciled CRADDOCK & SONS, and they tended to squeak. Ten people sat or stood in the already cluttered basement with nothing to do but wait and watch. Jimmy allowed no one to help him but Mr. Ellis. The sheriff looked at his watch every five seconds and sucked his teeth.

"Right on schedule," Jimmy kept saying. "We're right on schedule here."

After thirty minutes of fuss with the cords, electrodes, and sponges, Mr. Ellis at his side, Jimmy produced a snarl-clotted strand of Christmas lights that snagged and jerked forth in installments from the recesses of the carpetbag. Despite the sheriff's obvious disgust, Jimmy insisted on untangling the lights, and Mr. Ellis helped with that, too, as well as he could. The tiny cords and bulbs defied his thick fingers.

He wondered why he of all people should be so nervous, as fidgety as a boy who knew nothing of death. The answer came readily: He wasn't in charge. This was a younger man's show.

One of the deputies, chasing a roach, kicked some boxes, and Jimmy jumped as if shot. All the more reason for calm, Mr. Ellis decided. He tried to sort lights with the fewest, most economical motions.

Once the lights were plugged into the chair, both men stepped back, and Jimmy threw the switch, again with that disconcerting crash. Everybody but Jimmy and Mr. Ellis jumped. There was a whine like a fury of bees, but the lights didn't respond.

"The chair's broke," someone whispered.

"Shoot," Jimmy said, yanking the switch back down. "Hang on a second." He fumbled through the lights. His shirt rode up as he squatted, and Mr. Ellis looked away. "There," Jimmy said. "Just as I thought. Loose bulb."

"Jesus God," the sheriff muttered.

This time, when Jimmy threw the switch, the lights twinkled red and green.

A deputy said, "Well, ho, ho, ho."

"Be quiet," the sheriff said.

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Jimmy announced: "The lights show that two thousand volts are passing through the chair." He cleared his throat and added, in a more normal tone: "In some states, the law says you got to say that. Seems sorta silly to me."

"Well, we appreciate knowing it," the sheriff said. "It's a comfort to us. Can we bring him in now, Mr. Simpson?"

As he stooped to help Jimmy dampen the sponges yet again, Mr. Ellis slipped a jawbreaker into his mouth. A sour ball this time. Fiery hot. He heard the chains clinking down the stairs, the steady murmur of obscene patter. Childress entered, surrounded by six deputies. Handcuffed, trussed, and chained, he could walk only with short, sliding steps.

"Look at me shuffle along," he was mumbling as he entered. "Just call me Sambo. Just call me Rastus. Gimme some watermelon and put me on tour with Walcott's Rabbit's Foot Minstrels. All singing all dancing all colored *all* the time. Don't be feeling my ass! I ain't one of your grab-ass deputy girlfriends!"

His nonstop mumbled diatribe was his only sign of resistance as the deputies removed the fetters and held him down long enough for Jimmy to secure the straps.

The sheriff called out, "Childress, you change your mind about wanting a preacher?"

"You change your mind about being *white?*"

"All right, then," the sheriff said. "Mr. Simpson?"

As Jimmy tugged the hood down, Childress noticed the lights. "Damn, it Christmas *already?* Come sit on my lap here, boys and girls! Come tell Santa what the fuck you want him to bring you!"

Childress' thoughts were a thick oil coiling about Mr. Ellis's arms, slowing him. He fought free of them, and continued to work quickly. Now Jimmy looked wide-eyed and pale. Mr. Ellis glanced around. No one else was within fifteen feet of the chair. Mr. Ellis murmured:

"The creed."

Jimmy nodded. As he worked, he began to whisper the words, in English. Mr. Ellis whispered along with him, in a tongue that was old when the forward-thinking Dr. Guillotin ran his thumb along the edge of a cleaver, and mused; old when a translator in James I's employ bore down on his stile to write, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," and smiled, pleased by the rhythm; old, indeed, when the Babylonian king had a list of capital crimes chiseled onto a seven-foot pillar of basalt, to the glory of the sun god Shamash.

I am neither judge nor jury.
I am their instrument,
Their right hand,
Their Will given life.

"Santa got some chicken in his pockets for you," Childress called. "It's gone fry up *real* good. Come on over here and bite Santa's chicken leg one time!"

I am the blade,
The rope,
The gun,
The chair.

How the membership had debated that addition!

I am methods now shunned
And methods yet unknown,
But methods only.

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"Hey, these fellas be *chanting* and shit! You white people got some *strange*-ass mumbo-jumbo, you know that?"

What I do, I do without anger,
Without malice,
Without clumsiness or delay,
Without the infliction of needless suffering,
Without thought of personal gain.

The only sounds in the room were Childress ranting, Jimmy and Mr. Ellis mumbling to one another, and the sounds of their work: water being dipped, sponges being wrung out, leather sliding, and buckles clicking into place.

And with awe and reverence
For the door that I open
And for the door that I close
And for the citizens whose Will
I enact,
Whom I pledge to serve
Faithfully and obediently
And heedless of self
Until this my sad duty
Shall cease to be.

"Take off this hood! I *said,* take off this hood! It's you *white folks* that wears the hoods in *this* country, don't you know that? Didn't your daddy tell you *nothing?* I said, take off this hood!"

I am neither judge nor jury.
I am their instrument,
Their right hand.

As they spoke the last line, they looked at each other:

God, too, be just.

"How many of us you gone kill?" Childress shouted. "How many of us you gone be *able* to kill? How many?"

Jimmy and Mr. Ellis now stood beside the switch. The generator hummed behind them. Jimmy's hands darted about the control panel, checking relays. Then he turned, looked at the sheriff, mouthed the word: "Ready."

The sheriff nodded. Jimmy turned back toward the chair, took a deep breath, and, with one eye on the voltmeter, gripped the switch.

"Hey, Mr. Cracker," Childress said.

No one said anything. Jimmy was motionless.

"Lynch me *good,* Mr. Cracker! Lynch me good so *all* the niggers can see. Keep all the niggers *down.*"

Jimmy remained motionless, but Mr. Ellis saw a nerve jump in his jaw.

Deputy Hooper yelled: "Shut up, Childress! Shut up or I'll—" He caught the sheriff's eye and faltered.

The black hood pulsed as Childress jeered. "Ha ha ha! Or you'll do *what,* asshole? What the fuck you got *left* to do, you dumb shit? I ain't studying 'bout *you.* This is tween me and Mr. Cracker and his magic fusebox, haaaa ha ha!"

"Simpson," the sheriff hissed. "End this! Simpson!"

Mr. Ellis forced himself to look away from Childress. Jimmy had let go of the switch. He stared at his hands, rubbing them together as if warming them. He turned to Mr. Ellis and whispered:

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"I can't."

"What's wrong, Mr. Cracker? Can't get it up today?"

In Mr. Ellis's head was a clear picture of a Negro suspended from a tree, eyes bulging, mouth filled with—

Focus, old man. Focus.

Forcing Childress' thoughts aside, Mr. Ellis asked Jimmy:

"Why not?"

"Because I *want* to."

Mr. Ellis blamed himself. If he had not been here, had not insinuated himself into these proceedings, Jimmy would have done his duty, however provoked. Yet here was Mr. Ellis, a relic, a meddler, a damned nuisance. The conscience of the guild, he was sometimes called. As if a conscience was what Jimmy needed. Was what anyone needed.

"Please," Jimmy whispered.

"They's a lot more where *I* come from, Mr. Cracker! A whole hell of a lot more! You can't kill *all* of us!"

Enough. Mr. Ellis's duty was clear. "I understand," he said. He looked down, reached out with arthritic slowness, and gripped the switch.

The red rubber was clammy from Jimmy's sweat, and surprisingly inconsequential, compared to the ax-handle levers Mr. Ellis was used to. He feared breaking it. He found himself leaning on it, and made himself stop. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, blanked his mind. He opened his eyes and looked at Jimmy, who, tight-lipped, nodded once. *God, too, be just.*

"Hey, Mr. *Cracker*—"

There was no resistance as he shoved the switch forward.

Childress lunged.

One last image flashed into Mr. Ellis's head, gone so quickly it didn't register. Consciously.

The strap yanked even tighter across Childress' chest, held him an inch or two from the back of the chair. He kept straining forward, belly bulging, arm muscles ropy. Something sizzled. Upstairs, a phone began to ring. Childress had kicked with both feet at the first jolt, and now his heels were about a half-inch off the floor, trembling. All the straps held. The keening of the current increased in pitch. The flesh of Childress' arms flared dark red. Beneath the hood, he began to gurgle. His knees, imperceptibly at first, made as if to knock together, but even as they jerked more violently, the gap never closed. The phone kept ringing. A soft Southern voice counted Mississippis. Childress' left ankle began to spark. His fingers were outstretched. Smoke wisped from the top of his head. The phone stopped in mid-ring. The gobbling rose and fell. "Five Mississippi," Jimmy said, fingertips brushing Mr. Ellis's hand. "Half power." Mr. Ellis pulled back, and Childress' limbs relaxed. The sparks and smoke ceased. His arms darkened to normal. At thirty Mississippi, Jimmy tapped Mr. Ellis's hand, murmured, "Full power." Childress jerked forward, straining anew. There were three more cycles of Childress rising and falling. Then Jimmy placed his hand atop Mr. Ellis's, and together they inched the switch down to a thousand, to five hundred, to one twenty-five, Jimmy's hand forcing Mr. Ellis's to slow down, to twenty-five, to zero. Childress sat motionless. The smell was of hot tires and sewage and beef.

"Is it over?" someone asked.

"That's for the doctor to say." Jimmy let go of Mr. Ellis's hand to look at his wristwatch. "A little more'n two minutes. That ought to've done it."

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The sheriff voiced Mr. Ellis's thoughts. "What the hell was that phone call? Who went to get it? Was it Nat? What the *hell* was that phone call?"

"Doc, you better hold on a second," Jimmy said. "Wait up."

Stethoscope in hand, the doctor stopped a few feet from the chair. "Why wait?" he asked, frowning. "Why prolong the poor nigger's miseries?"

"That poor nigger's miseries ended more'n two minutes ago," Jimmy said, "and right now, the body he left behind is running about a hundred and thirty-eight degrees. I wouldn't be in a rush to touch him right yet."

The stairwell door crashed open and Deputy Nat stepped through, scratching his ear. He seemed in no hurry to speak. He looked surprised to see everyone staring at him.

"What's that smell?" he asked.

"For God's sake, Nat," the sheriff said. "Who was it on the phone?"

"Oh, the phone," Nat said, and laughed. "You'll love this one, Sheriff. It was old Miss Curry, Miss Adele Curry. Wanting to know when the execution was gonna be."

Mr. Ellis expelled his breath. Voices started up all around. The sheriff mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"I told her I was sorry ma'am, but I couldn't give out that information, and she said she only wanted to know because she thought the power might cut off when it happened—"

"Nat," said the sheriff.

"—and she was planning to bake her a funeral cake and she didn't want it to fall, and I told her there wouldn't be no loss of power, and she wanted to know how come that was because whenever the McClellands next door turned on their radio her parlor lights got dim—"

"Your family's gone be eating that funeral cake," said the sheriff, "if you don't hush up."

"Yes, *sir*."

One of the witnesses, a shiny-headed bald man who was pale around his black mustache, asked: "What was that gurgling sound? Oh, Jesus! That was plumb awful."

"Air in the lungs," Jimmy said. "No way to avoid it, really." He passed his hands over Childress, a few inches from his body, as if molding him from the air. "Oh, you could try and watch the rise and fall of the chest, I reckon, to time the current just right, but what's the point? That wasn't Mr. Childress talking, anyway. He was dead before you ever heard that sound."

The man did not look reassured.

Jimmy stepped back. "Ought to be okay now, Doc. Go on ahead."

"Phew, what a stink!" the doctor said. "Hadn't the boy taken a dump this week?" He held the stethoscope just above Childress' chest and reached with his other hand for the shirt buttons. He jumped back with a cry. His stethoscope bounced off the rubber mat to clatter onto the concrete.

The sheriff was beside him. "What's wrong?"

"He shocked me!"

"He *what?*"

The doctor rubbed his hands, eyes wide. "Like in the wintertime, when you go to touch a radio knob and a spark jumps out at you. Whoo! Lordy!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No, no. Scared me, though." With a grunt, he stooped and picked up the stethoscope.

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With an index finger, Jimmy poked Childress on the shoulder, then jumped back. "Damn! It's true. Never had *that* happen before."

The deputies had not come within yards of the chair since carrying it in the night before, but now they crowded around. "Let me touch him." "Me, too!" "Ow! I'll be damned! Feel of him, Earl." "Me *next*."

Jimmy tried to push them away. "Hey, now, boys, step back, please, step back and let the doc do what he's got to do. Come on, now. He ain't *officially* dead yet. Come on, now."

"Sparks jumping out like he's got a battery in his britches! Ow! Ain't that something? Ow!" Now the witnesses were joining the crowd.

The sheriff had been frozen, mouth open, face red and swollen. Now he bellowed: "God damn it, what's got into y'all? Come away from there! A bunch a younguns would have better sense than you men got!"

The doctor squirmed his way through the melee, feinting with his stethoscope. The sheriff cursed and roared, grabbing men by their shoulders and pushing them away. Jimmy, angry now, was in Deputy Hooper's face: "You think I don't know my own job? Huh? Is that what you think?" The deputy squared his shoulders, rolled something from cheek to cheek.

Mr. Ellis stood alone, his hand still gripping the switch.

He looked down at it.

For a moment he pictured Childress lunging forward one more time, scattering the crowd, showering sparks. His hand tightened on the switch.

Then the doctor called out: "Gentlemen, I hereby pronounce William Childress dead."

Mr. Ellis let go of the switch, closed his eyes. Childress hung below him, pendulous, weighty, dignified. Hands reached up to steady him, to receive him. As Mr. Ellis sawed, the rope blossomed, strand by strand. Childress dropped away. Thus lightened, the scaffold rose and floated free.

On Friday night, the deputies had unloaded the truck in a silence broken only by grunts and muttered oaths. On Saturday morning, they talked and joked constantly as they hauled and lifted. A few townsfolk stood and watched, but nothing like the insistent crowds of the day before.

The tarp was a struggle. An overnight break in the weather made for a nice day, with temperatures in the low 80s and a gusty breeze that beat the Mississippi flag overhead like a rug during spring cleaning, but the same breeze kept seizing the tarp and threatening to yank it and its handlers clear to Perdition, as Jimmy put it. By the time Jimmy tied the last rope, it was nearly noon. Jimmy and Mr. Ellis shook hands with the sheriff and with a few of the more gregarious deputies.

"Boys," the sheriff said to the deputies, "thank you for all your hard work and dedication. I hereby declare you all off duty!" The deputies whooped and laughed and started walking off, in twos and threes. Several unhooked their badges and put them in their shirt pockets.

One deputy told another, "Darla don't like no metal rubbing against her bosoms."

To Jimmy and Mr. Ellis, the sheriff said: "Gentlemen, I thank you. Is there anything else we can do for you here in Andalusia?"

Mr. Ellis was glad to see that Jimmy, too, could take a hint. "No, sir," Jimmy said, sliding the fat envelope into his pocket. "I appreciate it."

"Thank you for the hospitality," Mr. Ellis said.

"Thank *you*. Safe travels to you both. Mr. Simpson, we'll see you next time."

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They watched the sheriff walk back to the courthouse door. He had an oddly prissy gait, short-stepped and hurried. Rather than cut across the grass, he went first to the left and then diagonally, as the sidewalk dictated. The click of his heels was audible all the way. He entered the courthouse without turning or waving again.

"He's glad to be rid of us, ain't he?" Jimmy said.

"Oh, he'll be glad enough to see you again. Eventually."

Jimmy put one foot on the running board of the truck, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his hands. "Mr. Ellis, I ain't had the nerve to talk to you about what happened in there this morning."

"The equipment performed flawlessly," Mr. Ellis said. "You said so yourself."

"You know what I mean," Jimmy said. "He was in my head again, Mr. Ellis. Nearbouts the whole time. I saw things—things I don't ever want to see again. And I hated him for it. That's why I did what I done. I mean, what I *didn't* do. Oh, hell."

Mr. Ellis nodded. He had pondered for some time, as he watched the deputies wrestle the chair into the truck, what his parting words to Jimmy would be. He had made his decision. The board might disagree, but this was a field emergency, and in field emergencies, as far as Mr. Ellis was concerned, he *was* the board.

"I know what you didn't do, Jimmy," Mr. Ellis said. "You didn't pull the switch. You didn't hide your feelings. You didn't *lie*. You easily *could* have, but you didn't. In handing me that switch, you upheld the highest principle of the guild. And now I want you to do something else for the guild."

Jimmy stuffed his handkerchief into his pocket, squinted at the sun. "Quit, I reckon."

"No!" Mr. Ellis seized Jimmy's arm. "No, Jimmy. You misunderstand. The guild *needs* men like yourself, brave and principled men. What if this business were left to others, to men who weren't so brave and principled?" He let go, stepped back. Jimmy rubbed his forearm. "What *then?* Well. We need to know that the next generation is in good hands. *I* need to know that. That's what you can do for the guild. Go on with your work, with your principles. Reassure us."

Jimmy squinted into the sun. "I didn't think you exactly saw eye to eye with the way I did things, Mr. Ellis."

Mr. Ellis shrugged. "I am a man of my time, and my place. You have your equipment, I have mine." He rapped the fender with his knuckles. "Do your work, Jimmy, with the equipment you know best. You have the guild's support, and mine."

He extended his hand. Jimmy shook it.

"Thank you, Mr. Ellis."

"I'm pleased to have met you, Jimmy."

"Likewise, Mr. Ellis." Jimmy swung up into the cab, slammed the door. The impact made the side windowpane rattle and fall askew in the frame. "Damn it all," Jimmy said. He shoved the pane down and leaned out. "Good thing the chair's in better shape than the truck! Give you a lift someplace? Oh, right. Sorry. Well, I hope to see you soon, sir. Maybe we can work together again."

Mr. Ellis smiled and

Eyes wide the preceding Mr. Ellis said Please for the last time leaned his head back and looked up

said: "Perhaps so, Jimmy. I would have every confidence in you."

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Jimmy nodded, smiled, and cranked the truck. After a five-second tubercular rattle, the engine coughed to life. Jimmy revved it. The exhaust pipe vibrated and spat like a tommy gun. Gas fumes filled the square. Jimmy put the truck into gear and lifted his hand in a wave that turned into a salute as he drove away. Mr. Ellis lifted his hand, too, in a wave that turned into a futile attempt to ward the truck's flatulence away from his face. Some of the people on the street waved at the truck as it passed, but most went along their business without even a glance, as if it were no more interesting than the chicken truck that roared into the square a few seconds later, scattering feathers. In moments, the gutters were white and soft with down.

Mr. Ellis picked up his valise. At the curb, he waited for a Ford and a mule-drawn buggy to pass, and then crossed the street, tipping his hat to a well-upholstered lady in white lace and to a thin colored girl in gingham who walked behind her holding out a parasol. On the opposite sidewalk, Mr. Ellis first turned to the right, then changed his mind and went left, parting in two a surge of children who rushed past him so fast and noisy and dirty that their age and sex and race were indistinguishable. He climbed the three steps to the porch of Blackburn's General Store, where an old colored man and a grey-flecked hound both studied him.

"Good morning," Mr. Ellis said.

"Morning," the old man replied. "Say . . ."

Mr. Ellis paused, hand on the knob. "Yes?"

The old man leaned forward, overalls bunching at the waist. He had one clouded eye. "You that English feller, ain't you?" he asked in an ancient, trembling voice. "The one that came to watch—to watch old Childress go home. Ain't you?"

A small town indeed. "That's right," he said.

The old man glanced about, whispered: "How was he at the end? Won't nobody say. Was he peaceful-like? Did he go easy? Did he make his peace with the Lord?" Mr. Ellis said nothing, and the old man's face spasmed. "Oh, now, please sir, don't lie to a old feller what ain't done you no wrong. Tell me the truth. Did he put aside his hateful ways at the end?"

What harm would it do? Mr. Ellis nodded and murmured: "Yes, he did. He repented, and asked forgiveness, and went in peace."

The old man studied Mr. Ellis's face for a long time, then began to smile. He sat back, crossed his legs, and pulled a pipe from his pocket. "*Did* he, now?" he asked, striking a match on his shoe and lighting the bowl. "Did he, now? Old Willie *Childress?*" He nodded and puffed, began to cackle with laughter, still looking at Mr. Ellis, his good eye dancing. He no longer sounded old. "Yes, *that's* likely, ain't it?" he chortled. "Ain't *that* a good 'un, to tell the old nigger? And you tells it so *well,* too! Tells it like you was *born* here!"

He was still cackling as Mr. Ellis entered the store, his footsteps changing from hollow thumps to solid thuds as he crossed the threshold. At first, he could see little in the relative dimness, but after he blinked and strained for a few seconds, the sausages and clothes and pots hanging from the ceiling and the crates and cans and sacks piled in the floor began to resolve themselves. He glanced toward the coiled shapes on the hardware wall, disregarded them, and focused instead on the shaving mugs and brushes cluttering one of the glass countertops. As he walked toward them, someone said:

"Morning."

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Startled, Mr. Ellis replied automatically: "Good morning." It was the little headache man, who was no longer lying on the hardware counter but on the household-goods counter, quite near the shaving implements. As Mr. Ellis leaned over to peer through the glass, he could smell the mud and leather of the little man's shoes.

"I'm not in your way, am I?" asked the little man.

"Not at all," said Mr. Ellis.

"'Cause if I am, I'll move."

Arrayed beneath the countertop, nestled among an artful snarl of leather straps and carrying cases, were a half-dozen fully extended straight razors.

"Hey, I talked to you yesterday, didn't I, mister?"

"Yes, you did," said Mr. Ellis, without looking at him. "How is your headache today? Better, I trust?"

"Head's a good bit better, thank you kindly for remembering. But don't even *ask* about my sciatica. I got such a throb in my sciatica, I can't even tell you. That counter over yonder's better for my head, but this one's better for my sciatica, don't ask me why. I don't question the Lord's ways His wonders to perform."

The longest blade, at nine inches, looked as if it could mow crops. To get a better look, Mr. Ellis slid aside a shaving mug that depicted a straw-hatted Negro boy holding up a fish on a line.

"But I done took me a Goody's, and that'll be kicking in rectly. Goody's don't advertise it's good for sciatica, but it *is*. Goody's good for everything."

"I'll have to remember that," Mr. Ellis said. "May I buy you a Coke today?"

In the burnished steel, Mr. Ellis could see his dulled outline and the sweeping blades of the ceiling fan.

"No thank you, sir, I just did open me one. Ain't hardly stopped fizzing good. I 'preciate it, though."

Once, the preceding Mr. Ellis, in an expansive mood, had taken his young assistant to dinner at a French restaurant in Montreal, where the reflected pulse of the ceiling fan in the overly polished silverware proved so distracting that the assistant laid his napkin over them. Groping for conversation, the young man studied the menu and finally said: "The snapper sounds good. What do you recommend, Mr. Ellis?" The older man gasped and knocked over his water glass. Pale and wide-eyed, he glanced about, then leaned across the darkening tablecloth to whisper: "For God's sake, man, no names in public! Do you want a riot on your hands? Think of my position, please!"

Please Eyes wide Mr. Ellis said Please for the last time leaned his head back and looked up at his successor who lifted the razor and drew it once across to the right and intended to draw it once again across to the left but found that wasn't necessary and jumped back as the old man's head lolled leaving the younger man alone in the shabby farmhouse kitchen to hear a cow past milking low across the highway and hear the flood on the linoleum become a patter and then a drip in counterpoint to the faucet and while hearing these things the younger man mumbled Without anger Without malice Without clumsiness or delay Mumbled at first and then spoke aloud and then spoke loudly the creed taught him by the older man who had trained him well and then when he was ready passed on to him the duty so that Mr. Ellis who taught Mr. Ellis also became first client of Mr. Ellis and Mr. Ellis left Mr. Ellis and his darkening tablecloth and turned up his coat collar as

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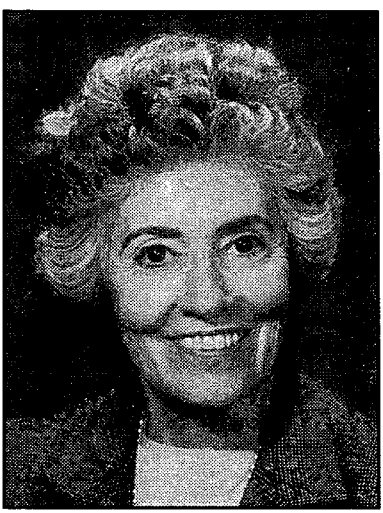
he stood atop Mr. Ellis's back porch steps blew into hands smelling of Mr. Ellis's soap and shivered in the cold that came early to Mr. Ellis that fall and never fully left God, too, be just.

Someone with a deep voice cleared his throat, and Mr. Ellis looked up to see the two store owners standing behind the counter, gazing at him not with hostility, but not with friendliness either. The man had his hands clasped behind him and a spatter of gristle on his apron. The woman was screwing on the head of a porcelain doll, a foot-high bride. As the fit at the neck tightened, the painted eyes slowed, then grated to a stop, and they, too, gazed at him.

The man with the apron asked, not unkindly, "Can we help you with anything, sir?"

Mr. Ellis cast one final glance at the longest razor. What workmanship! What efficiency! He looked up, smiled. "No, thank you," he said. "Not today." O

Stuttering Didn't Keep Her Grounded.



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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Eternity is in Love with the Productions of Time

A handy source here in the US for the publications of over forty foreign small presses is Firebird Distributing. They handle, among other items, those classic reprints from the UK firm Pulp Fictions. On an H. Rider Haggard jag, Pulp Fictions brings us this season the "She" trilogy: *She* (trade, $9.95, 246 pages, ISBN 1-902058-03-8), *Ayesha* (trade, $9.95, 301 pages, ISBN 1-902058-04-6), and *She and Allan* (trade, $9.95, 290 pages, ISBN 1-902058-05-4). I read these rousers nearly thirty years ago, and heartily concur with the words of introducer David Pringle: "Haggard was . . . arguably the most influential of all pulpsters." Buy these, or face the wrath of an immortal Valley Girl (Nile Valley, that is).

Based on some judicious sampling of its bulk, I can affirm that *The Sci-Fi Channel Encyclopedia of TV Science Fiction* (Warner Aspect, trade, $15.99, 668 pages, ISBN 0-446-67478-8), compiled by Roger Fulton and John Betancourt, is comprehensive, witty, and seductive. Browsing its contents—replete with episode- and cast-listings, commentary, and plot synopses—is a trip down memory lane and into territory so weird it might be an alternate continuum. How pleased I was to be reminded of *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.*, whose Stefanie Powers inspired my teenage devotion. And how disoriented I was also to learn that Supermarionation master Gerry Anderson produced a series called *Torchy The Battery Boy*. Much similar information is here for your enraptured perusal.

Neil Norman and his Cosmic Orchestra lend a Henry Mancini brightness to the assorted themes on *Greatest Science Fiction Hits IV* (GNP Crescendo, CD, GNPD2258). Get the guests at your next party whistling along with "The Wild Wild West" or "The Saint" for a nostalgic good time. And Jerry Goldsmith's score for the latest *Star Trek* film, *Insurrection* (GNP Crescendo, CD, GNPD8059) flits from celestial to pastoral to martial, all the while surprising you with eruptions of the famous original Trek-riff.

Fred Lerner is a well-known and respected figure in SF fandom. He is also a professional librarian of long standing whose new book is *The Story of Libraries* (Continuum, hardcover, $24.95, 246 pages, ISBN 0-8264-1114-2). Full of more romance and intrigue than a dozen fantasies, this volume is a must-have for any lover of books and the institutions that have evolved to shelter them. Beginning in Sumerian times and extending right up to our Web-dominated era, Lerner's volume details clearly and concisely the evolution of libraries and the culture of literacy in general. Nowadays, when the widespread availability of written material has left us all a little jaded, we need more than ever to be reminded of the preciousness of books. Lerner's survey performs this task admirably and entertainingly, with veneration and quiet drama.

Like some demented yet wise fusion of Jackie Mason and Henry Miller, avant-pop icon Ronald

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Sukenick regales us with his quasi-autobiography in *Mosaic Man* (FC2, trade, $14.95, 260 pages, ISBN 1-57366-079-5), whose punning title refers to both Judaism and fragmentation. Although he protests that his book is "metaphor, not science fiction," Sukenick's tale is threaded with fantastical passages. As a child, he flys against the Nazis with Captain Midnight. In Israel as an adult, he becomes the Golem itself. In Venice, he watches a young man levitate. And the closing portion of this wry and sly meditation on Jewishness and artistic responsibility is a parody of conspiratorial thrillers. In short, pure avant pop for now people.

With the permission of author Doug Rice, I mildly censor the title of his newest book, *A Good ****boy is Hard to Find* (CPAOD, trade, $5.00, 76 pages, ISBN 1-886988-08-0). Like Rice's controversial *Blood of Mugwump* (1996), these short stories and poems run sexual identity through the blender-blades of a burnished dark language. At times grazing Richard Calder's heated vision, Rice generally emulates his totemic figure, Grandma Mugwump: "She only knew how to do one thing. Give birth to madness." But this is madness bent toward artistic ends, heresy in search of divinity.

For over thirty years, a scene from Theodore Sturgeon's "The Perfect Host" has remained vivid in my mind: a man capering in the bed of a moving truck is decapitated by a freak accident. This vision of sprightly human gaiety brought up short by the harsh strictures of an uncaring universe seems to me to encapsulate Sturgeon's wisdom. Without human love, the cosmos is a cruel place. So don't lose out on sharing Sturgeon's posthumous love: lay your hands immediately on the richly endowed fifth volume in his collected short stories, *The Perfect Host* (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, $27.50, 386 pages, ISBN 1-55643-284-4). Here you'll find classics such as "Die, Maestro, Die!" and "The Hurkle is a Happy Beast," as well as two never-before-published stories. Paul Williams's endnotes—sadly, perhaps "the only biography this fine twentieth century storyteller receives"—are paired with an appreciative introduction by Larry McCaffery.

Unique in zinedom, *Pirate Writings* showcases the eclectic tastes of publisher Ed McFadden, publishing works of mystery, suspense and horror, along with plenty of fantasy and SF. Now you can sample the proud accomplishments of six years of this enthusiastic zine in *The Best of Pirate Writings* (Padwolf Publishing, trade, $12.95, 219 pages, ISBN 1-890096-04-0). Stories and poems from such well-known names as Mike Resnick, Roger Zelazny, Allen Steele, and Alan Dean Foster alternate with equally exciting offerings from up-and-comers like Eric Sonstroem and Christine Beckert. One of my favorites here is "On Oswald Avenue," a Grand Guignol from Tom Piccirilli. Sign on under the flag of McFadden's Jolly Roger now!

Two fine volumes of horror poetry coincidentally arrive together, illustrating how different sensibilities handle similar themes. *The Selected Poetry of John Grey* (Dark Regions Press, chapbook, $4.95, 58 pages) offers jarringly vibrant visions of everyday terrors. Grey favors desert imagery in poems such as "Hosts," and the frantic starkness of such landscapes is an accurate reflection of his worldview. And yet his "Construction Site" veers toward a more absurd take on life, as a passerby witnesses infernal hijinx through the typical peekaboo hole in the fence around an urban project. Brett Rutherford's massive retrospective collection, *Whippoorwill Road* (Grim Reaper Books, trade, $24.95,

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206 pages), stands in contrast to Grey's collection as a more cerebral, elegant volume, one where the effects are subtler, the emotions recollected in tranquillity. Divided into such sections as "Things Seen in Graveyards" and "Die Laughing," Rutherford's compilation ranges across the supernatural spectrum with the fervor of Poe and the aloofness of Lovecraft. Shudders aplenty here, poetically nuanced.

Dark Regions also offers us *Babylon Gardens* (trade, $5.95, 79 pages, ISBN 1-888993-07-3), a collection of short fictions from J.W. Donnelly. Moving easily from fantasy to SF, Donnelly exhibits a kind of Frederic Brown facility, especially in a short-short such as "Purge." Striking illustrations by Donald Schank add further vigor to this sampling of Donnelly's over one hundred published stories.

You might like to dive straight from these collections into Earl Murray's *Ghosts of the Old West* (Tor, trade, $14.95, 201 pages, ISBN 0-312-86795-6. This assemblage of true-life hauntings contains a plethora of paranormal histories, most of which will be unfamiliar to the general reader. Murray—a novelist whose specialty is the Old West—has a smooth way with these intimate tales of things better left unseen that haunt the high plains and west coast of America. Reading his taut prose, I fantasized the voice of Lorne Greene or James Arness or Fess Parker narrating an enthralling documentary in my ear.

From its opening sentence, I knew I'd be stirred up by Lance Olsen's creative writing text, *Rebel Yell* (Cambrian, trade, $18.95, 239 pages, ISBN 1-878914-50-2): "Carefully follow what most handbooks on writing fiction tell you, and chances are you'll end up producing a nice, tight, well-crafted story that could have been produced just as easily in 1830." Olsen, a PKD-award winner, has delivered us the anti-*Writer's Digest* manual of how to brainstorm your way to "writing for the new millennium." Stuffed with practical and theoretical wisdom culled not only from Olsen but from over forty interviews with writers, editors, and zinesters, this book could actually liberate your mind and talents faster than you could say "psilocybin pep pills."

Brian Clark's Permeable Press, which merged not too long ago with Cambrian, releases its final solo title, Nikki Dillon's *Scratch* (chapbook, $5.00, 54 pages). Four finely polished stories immaculately packaged hold our attention from page one. The title piece stands out as an unflinching dissection of fame cast as a uniquely postmodern "deal with the devil" tale. And an equally cleverly designed broadsheet—in a limited signed edition of 100—is Bruce Boston's *Confessions of a Body Thief* (Talisman, $4.00, ISBN 0-938075-75-6), a poem whose wry musings compress a novel into a dozen stanzas.

The granddaddy of all timeslip fantasies is back in print. Robert Nathan's *Portrait of Jennie* (Tachyon Publications, trade, $14.00, 118 pages, ISBN 1-892391-03-1) has cast its shadow over everything from Heinlein's *The Door into Summer* (1957) to Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968), and holds up formidably today. A beguiling cover by Michael Dashow complements this engagingly light yet potent romance between painter Eben Adams and time-roving Jennie Appleton.

Another much-appreciated reappearance is Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (Indiana University Press, trade, $12.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-253-21234-0). Assuredly one of the latterday classics of SF, *Walker* (1980) fuses the drunken language of Walt Kelly's *Pogo* with quantum

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Taoist musings and provides an emotional rollercoaster ride for us and its eponymous postapocalyptic hero, rather like a blend of Crowley's *Engine Summer* (1979) and Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967). With new notes and afterword, this volume is an essential part of any SF collection.

The second volume of editor Phyllis Eisenstein's anthology, *Spec-Lit* (Columbia College Chicago, trade, $11.95, 172 pages, ISBN 0-932026-48-6) arrives bearing a gorgeous Emsh cover that reflects, curiously enough, the feel of this mixed student-professional venture. Solid stories planted firmly in the traditional heart of SF make this volume read like a prime issue of *Galaxy*, circa 1962. A particularly enjoyable entry is Simon Farrell's "Great Intentions," which recalls pure Sheckley hijinx. This labor of love and "pay forward" beneficence continues to merit our support.

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Thrills for Tots

Raise the allowances of your sons and daughters so that they may rush out and purchase the following imagination-stimulating books. Or better yet, buy several of these titles yourselves as gifts that will be cherished for a lifetime.

Ray Bradbury's *Ahmed and the Oblivion Machines* (Avon, hardcover, $14.00, unpaginated, ISBN 0-380-97704-4) is subtitled "A Fable" and as such lacks some of the deeply felt specificity of, say, *Dandelion Wine* (1957). Nonetheless, this tale of a young Arab boy and the mysteries he encounters in a desert testing reveals that our author, like Ahmed, remains "crazed with delight at all that he saw in the heavens." B&W illustrations by Chris Lane convey an inebriated wonder consonant with Bradbury's exclamatory prose.

Four new nonfiction titles from Seymour Simon provide clear-eyed introductions to the miracles of our micro- and macrocosm. *Bones* (Morrow Junior Books, hardcover, $16.00, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-14644-9) and *Muscles* (Morrow Junior Books, hardcover, $16.00, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-14642-2) give guided tours of the human body replete with ground-breaking microphotography, colorized X-rays and dramatic drawings. Scaling up and out, we encounter Simon's *Mercury* (Mulberry Books, trade, $5.95, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-16382-3) and *Venus* (Mulberry Books, trade, $5.95, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-16161-8), a duo that concisely delivers up-to-the-minute information on two of our less hospitable neighbors. What astounds me most about these four books is how details of the nat-

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ural world that Leonardo would have killed for are now the stuff of kindergartens. Thus does humanity advance, one small step at a time.

Back on the narrative front, James Stevenson's *The Oldest Elf* (Mulberry Books, trade, $4.95, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-16154-5) is a droll tale of two of Santa's downsized helpers and their determination to help bring Christmas in on their own terms. Stevenson's cartoony drawing style perfectly suits his subtle humor. In *My Friend the Piano* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, hardcover, $16.00, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-13239-1), Catherine Cowan has authored a story that will appeal to anyone ever forced to endure music lessons seemingly designed to stifle creativity rather than encourage it. Cowan's unnamed girl who rides her wild-beast piano into the sunset rather than submit to authority should enter folklore as a new rebel. Kevin Hawkes's colorful and tumultuous acrylics are inspiring, especially his wordless final page. The famous fairytale about terpsimaniacal royalty known as *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* (Mulberry Books, trade, $5.95, unpaginated, ISBN 0-688-14392-X) enjoys a robust retelling by Marianna Mayer. The gorgeous paintings of K.Y. Craft, burnished like flower-stuffed Flemish canvases, repay endless awed examination.

Four dalliances with ghosts of varicolored sheets should agreeably chill youngsters.

Moaning Bones (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, hardcover, $14.00, 61 pages, ISBN 0-688-16021-2) offers modern and ancient African-American myths colloquially recast by Jim Haskins and eerily illustrated by Felicia Marshall. *Great Ghost Stories* (Books of Wonder, hardcover, $22.00, 204 pages, ISBN 0-688-14587-6), assembled and illustrated by Barry Moser, brings together well-known favorites such as Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw" and Lovecraft's "The Music of Erich Zann" with lesser-known gems like E. Nesbit's "Man-Size in Marble." Moser's stunning full-color plates resemble Howard Pyle's work filtered through Francis Bacon's canvases.

I never encountered any of the books of Robert Westall until the new edition of his 1977 YA novel *The Watch House* (Beech Tree, mass-market, $4.95, 218 pages, ISBN 0-688-16372-6), but I'm now inclined to rank him right up there with Susan Cooper, and shall certainly search out more of his work. Psychologically acute, undiminished by the changing fashions of two decades, exciting and picturesque, Westall's tale of London adolescent Anne and her summer spent by the sea round Tynemouth in the grip of maritime ghosts is a pure pleasure for readers of any age. Westall's prose is limber and graceful, and his plotting and characterization impeccable. Snatch this affordable novel from the Davey Jones's Locker of overlooked titles.

Lighter in tone than *The Watch House*, yet just as rewarding in its own way, is Stephanie Tolan's *The Face in the Mirror* (Morrow Junior Books, hardcover, $15.00, 214 pages, ISBN 0-688-15394-1). Fourteen-year-old Jared Kingsley, sent to live with his heretofore-unknown biological father and bratty half-brother Tad, is plunged into the shimmering world of live theater, complete with a morose Victorian thespian ghost named Garrick Marsden. The ongoing Kingsley production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* neatly brackets and parallels the strife within the family, and on the whole the novel would do credit to even Fritz Leiber.

Cool Britannia

Choose either Wells or Shelley (but not Gernsback) as progenitor,

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and you're forced to admit that SF is a British invention. How fares our beloved literature in the land of its nativity these days? Answer at the end of this column.

Brian Aldiss is one of those pivotal figures who underpin much of modern UK SF. For nearly fifty years, from his first sale in 1954 right up until the present, Aldiss has helped entertain, instruct and enlarge. Without the example of such seminal works as *Greybeard* (1964), *Barefoot in the Head* (1969), the *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-85), and *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), our genre would be much the scantier and less ambitious. Additionally, Aldiss has often been SF's representative to the world at large, laboring without pay to gain us recognition and our fair share of kudos.

Now you can discover the fascinating human dimensions behind Aldiss the writer and public figure in his autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $29.95, 484 pages, ISBN 0-312-19346-7). The title refers cleverly both to the swiftness with which the human lifespan is traversed, and also to those magic moments of epiphany during which eternal revelations can descend. Composed along innovative era-jumping lines, Aldiss's story never grows tedious or unfocused. At the start, richly detailed sections compiling his old-fashioned childhood during the thirties alternate with vibrant memoirs of his service in Asia during W.W.II. As Aldiss matures, we share his struggles to break into print. Well-deserved glories accrue during the sixties and seventies. Later, deep insights into the mysteries of consciousness—primarily his own, but also our shared Jungian depths—flow during the years of Aldiss middle age. Along the way, humorous and touching anecdotes abound, delivered in prose as polished and vital as that in his novels, as steamy and appetizing as one of his mother Dot's rabbit pies.

One of Aldiss' wildest stories was titled "Let's Be Frank." The courageous man has taken that title as his motto, to wonderful effect.

In his second and third novels, a tight duology comprised of *Hot Head* (1992) and *Hotwire* (1995), Simon Ings furiously limned a transhuman future where giant rogue AIs known as Massives plot a biologically ripe fate for the solar system incorporating jazzed-up humans weird enough to be their own aliens. In language as dense as anything by McAuley or Egan, Ings proved himself their conceptualizing equal, an outrider on humanity's singularity-bound forced march into the future.

Ings's newest novel, *Headlong* (Voyager, mass-market, £5.99, 335 pages, ISBN 0-00-647725-9), is by virtue of a single shared character (the scientist Dr. Nouronihar) a prequel to his duology. Yet in effect and tone, it's vastly different from the prior two novels. More along the lines of M. John Harrison's *Signs of Life* (1997) or Richard Kadrey's *Kamikaze L'Amour* (1995), *Headlong* is a love story and a tale of detection set much closer to our present time. (The similarity to Harrison's work, at least, cannot be coincidental, for Ings has even collaborated with Harrison on a story or two.) Consequently, the milieu of *Headlong,* distorted as it might be with new drugs, new politics, and new technology, feels more homey than that in the duology, and so the bruising events hit even more forcefully.

Like most great Chandler- or Hammettesque *noir* fiction, *Headlong* is narrated stylishly in the first person. The poetically melancholy Chris Yale was an architect assigned to help colonize the Moon. Given brain implants that confer godlike

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sensory abilities by his employer, the enigmatic Apolloco, Yale and his wife Joanne, along with the other Lunarians, became something other than mortal. However, economic collapse on Earth dragged them back "downwell," where they were stripped of their new senses. Now, like the doomed starpilots in Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah. . . ," the exiled Lunarians form a caste of crippled freaks, subject to a disease called Epistemic Appetite Imbalance.

Bad as his lot is, Yale is about to experience worse. His ailing wife turns up murdered, and his search for the reasons behind her strange death propel the swiftly moving—indeed, headlong—plot.

Ings's book is stuffed with classic *noir* tropes: treacherous friends, helpful enemies, driven cops, sexual confusion, drugs, riddles, assignations with strangers in seedy dives. But Ings infuses each trope with the requisite SF energy, and the union of genres is seamless. Ings manages also to balance the fate of individuals with the fate of his whole world, giving each its proper weight. Here is Ings via Chris Yale musing on the paradoxical search for truth:

> The detective looks for a single cause. The detective hunts through the spreading World, dismissing the irrelevant, the ambiguous, the accidental, and searches instead for one Answer.
>
> The World, on the other hand, has no focus. From a single cause, it extemporizes a complex creation, a live and changing mass, an endless spew of things. The World doesn't care for answers, only questions.
>
> The detective's truth and the World's truth are different. Find one, you lose the other.

Adding into the mix a few touches of chill Ballardian perspective, Ings gives us a novel that explores real emotional and psychic depths, and that also happens to chart some dangerous shoals in the murky waters ahead of us.

Arch-satirist Will Self—whose recent novel, *Great Apes* (1997), delivered our familiar world into the hands of our primate cousins, producing jabs and japes aplenty—now resurfaces with a short story collection, his third: *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (Bloomsbury, hardcover, £14.99, 244 pages, ISBN 0-7475-3906-5). Although a master of mimetic rendering, a dissector of snobs and proles, of status and shame on a par with Tom Wolfe, Self can never long resist the lure of the fantastic, and the majority of these stories (where the common theme is addiction of one sort or another) dive deep into SF territory. In "The Rock of Crack as Big as the Ritz," two poor black Londoners discover a natural vein of crack cocaine beneath their house, with sadly predictable results. (Their ultimate fates are revealed in the closer, "The Nonce Prize," which, while non-fantastic, contains a savage parody of science fiction writers.) "Flytopia" is a Dischian love affair with the insect kingdom. In "A Story for Europe" the psychic tensions of the developing Common Market induce something like brain transference between a UK toddler and a German banker. And a psychologist's nervous patient finds his whole world converging toward generic "Davedom" in "Dave Too."

But the prize of this collection is "Caring, Sharing," which raises our contemporary desire for cocooned safety to absurd heights—literally. Biologists have bred for our convenience "emotos," a race of childishly retarded giants who accompany normal humans as protectors and

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walking security blankets. The infantilism of those who would smooth the world of all rough edges is rendered here as sharply as in Vonnegut's famous "Harrison Bergeron."

Wacked on neon language, as cold-bloodedly perceptive as some interstellar agent of our redemption, and yet as caringly outraged as the most liberal earthly do-gooder, Will Self as literary bartender dispenses cocktails of acid-laced Cointreau.

A new UK publisher debuts with two strikingly handsome and bold short-story collections. Oneiros Books (8 Short Street, Swansea, England SA1 6YG) has ambitious plans (CDs and graphic novels hopefully await in its future) for its line of transgressive goods. If the first fusillade from Oneiros is an accurate harbinger, they will earn both notoriety and success.

David Conway's *Metal Sushi* (trade, $12.95, 201 pages, ISBN 1-902197-00-3) contains six tales that use the hallucinatory visions and style of William Burroughs as a launching pad into even more outrageous territory. With the raw vitality of the *manga* and *anime* admired by one of Conway's madder-than-mad scientists, the hideous Dr. Yoshida of "Manta Red," Conway projects our worst tendencies into twisted landscapes of desire and repulsion made possible by scientific hubris. "Omegaville," where the literal short-term demise of the universe is paralleled by the strange diseases of the protagonist Verlaine, reads like the offspring of Michael Moorcock and Clark Ashton Smith. Remarkably unwavering across the whole volume, Conway's Huysmans-like prose inevitably buries the reader as if under a living crimson blanket. Add Conway's name to a short roster containing those of John Shirley, Rob Hardin, and Michael Hemmingson.

Grant Morrison, although best known as a writer for such DC comics as *Arkham Asylum* and *Doom Patrol*, is here represented by the short stories and plays contained in *Lovely Biscuits* (trade, $12.95, 189 pages, ISBN 1-902197-01-1). Morrison resides on the same bleeding edge of fiction shared by Conway, although his language more closely resembles a melange of Kafka, Ben Hecht (circa *Fantazius Mallare* [1922]), Tom Stoppard, and Lovecraft. In the outrageous "The Room Where Love Lives" and the poignant "Lovecraft in Heaven," Morrison follows the tracks of Chthulu to arcane zones never before penetrated. And his play "Depravity" manages the near impossible by humanizing Aleister Crowley. Join Morrison on his own Damned Patrol.

In her previous two books, *Moths to a Flame* (1995) and *Songspinners* (1996), Sarah Ash showed herself adept at fashioning alternate Earths slightly skewed from ours, where supernatural forces could find room to infiltrate the lives of characters inhabiting tales of old-fashioned "romance." Choosing models such as Dumas, Hugo, and Zola, Ash seemed allied to such contemporaries as Tanith Lee, Caroline Stevermer, and Felicity Savage. In her new novel, *The Lost Child* (Millennium Orion, mass-market, £6.99, 344 pages, ISBN 0-75281-683-7), Ash continues in this mold, ultimately recalling the Grandmother of all such stories, Andre Norton.

In a pint-sized kingdom resembling France circa our Renaissance era livse a race of refugees, the Tsyonim. The Tsyonim are analogous in almost every respect to the Jews of our world. Outcast from their ancestral homeland, Tsiyon, intensely religious, they inhabit ghettos on the sufferance of the "Europeans," and are subject to random pogroms. One difference is that certain angelic, elemental Guardians of the Tsyonim are quite real, spirits bound to four

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Guardian Amulets long thought lost. Legend has it that should the Amulets ever be reunited, Tsiyon will rise again.

In the city of Arcassanne, one Amulet has come into the possession of a Gentile, Captain Jaufré d'Orbiel. Untrained in dealing with its spirit, he becomes possessed. From his contamination will flow a multitude of disastrous events affecting Tsyonim and Gentiles alike.

Our second focus is the young tailor, Rahab. Entrusted with another Amulet by the local rabbi, Rebh Jehiel, Rahab embarks reluctantly on a mission to save his close friends and his tribe, and is eventually forced to face Jaufré in a contest of wills.

Ash tells her tale straightforwardly and enthusiastically, in simple yet strong language. She relies on dramatic coincidence a number of times, especially when it comes to the reunion of Rahab and a long-lost brother, but she boldly leaps over any crevasse of unlikelihood. Her major subtlety lies in the multivalent use of the "lost child" motif, and in the surprise conclusions for two budding love affairs that initially seem promising for Rahab. This book lacks some of the urbanity of her previous two, but only fittingly, given the unsophisticated natures of the people involved. Over all, anyone who has ever felt a kinship with Andre Norton's good-hearted youthful protagonists struggling with fates larger than they ever thought they could shoulder will instantly be drawn into Ash's tale.

Any SF reader not asleep during the nineties will know the name Stephen Baxter, and the high quality of his work. Baxter has stamped Hard SF with his combination of commonsense prose and wild-eyed speculations based on the farthest fringework of modern science. Prolific and eager to work in many different modes, Baxter offers us a full catalog of his extensive skills in *Traces* (Voyager, hardcover, £16.99, 359 pages, ISBN 0-00-225427-1). Whether dealing with Blishian alien environments (a specialty), alternate histories, our solar system, the far future, or Victorian steampunk scenarios, Baxter employs economy of language, sensory richness, and clever plotting. Perhaps my favorite piece here is the understated "Weep for the Moon," in which musician Glenn Miller *almost* changes the course of history, but chooses duty over glory. This volume rates an automatic purchase.

Now we bring in a Commonwealth ringer, an Australian, who helps affirm the liveliness of "British" SF.

The mere mention of Greg Egan's name on a new story collection should send *Asimov's* readers rushing to their virtual or physical bookstores. *Luminous* (Millennium Orion, trade, £9.99, 295 pages, ISBN 1-85798-552-4) assembles three stories from this magazine and seven from *Interzone*, all ten utterly entrancing from their glittery mutant blossoms right down to their epistemological, ontological, existential roots. As always, Egan's major theme is the construction of the self, most explicitly in "Mister Volition," whose narrator gets an epiphany about the conglomerative nature of our minds. But questions of identity proliferate everywhere, whether it's cosmic identity in "Luminous," sexual identity in "Cocoon," racial identity in "Mitochondrial Eve," or continuity of consciousness in "Transition Dreams." Never content with merely raising intriguing dilemmas, Egan always actually pushes bravely toward at least partial solutions to these conundrums, illustrating his own uniquely inquiring selfhood.

So: does "British SF" currently flourish? Can the Spice Girls sell records? ○

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Join the WorldCon IMMEDIATELY to avoid higher at-the-door rates. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 1999

9-11—**Shore Leave.** For info, write: **Box 6809, Towson MD 21285.** Or phone: **(410) 496-4456** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **shoreleave@aol.com.** Con will be held in: Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marriott Hunt Valley Inn. Guests will include: Tim Russ, B. March, Crispin, DeHaas. A major fan-run Star Trek convention.

9-11—**ReaderCon. (E-mail) readercon@mit.edu.** Westin, Waltham (Boston) MA. H. Ellison, E. Datlow. Written SF/fantasy.

9-11—**Toronto Trek. (E-mail) tcomm@icomm.ca.** Regal Constellation, Toronto ON. Beltran, De Longis, Hatch. Star Trek.

9-11—**ConCertino. (781) 646-3118.** Marriott, Westborough (Boston) MA. The Suttons, Hutnik. SF/fantasy folksinging.

9-11—**Khan. (719) 597-5259.** Ramada Inn, Colorado Springs. Kevin Anderson, Rebecca Moesta, Myles Pinkney.

9-11—**CastleCon. (301) 292-5231. (E-mail) bruce@fantek.org.** Holiday Inn, Frederick MD. General weirdness and fun.

9-11—**Gateway. (314) 524-3014. (E-mail) mstadter@stlf.org.** Henry VIII Hotel, St. Louis MO. Katsulas, Masterson. Media.

9-11—**ClueFest. (781) 646-3118.** Harvey Hotel, Plano (Dallas) TX. Peter Robinson, Carole N. Douglas. Mystery fiction.

9-11—**EyeCon. (E-mail) rrandisi@aol.com.** Adams Mark, St. Louis MO. L. D. Estleman, Randisi, Lutz. Mystery fiction.

15-18—**NECon. (401) 722-4738.** Roger Williams U., Bristol RI. Kim Newman, Tessier, Wrightson. Writers' conference.

16-18—**Kingdom by the Sea. (407) 359-5814.** Holiday Inn International Dr., Orlando FL. Beauty & the Beast TV show.

16-18—**Earth2 Con. (708) 209-1426.** Radisson Valley Ctr., Sherman Oaks CA. R. Dunbar, J, Gegenhuber, M. Delprate.

16-18—**AnimeExpo. (818) 441-3653. (E-mail) info@anime-expo.org.** Conv. Center and Hilton, Anaheim (Los Angeles) CA.

16-18—**Nexus. (Web) www.cosham.demon.co.uk.** Hilton National Hotel, Bristol England. Robert Duncan McNeill. Media.

16-18—**Wizard World. www.wizardworld.com/chicago/chicago.html.** Conv. Center, Rosemont IL. Comics and media.

17-18—**(Star) Trek Celebration. (913) 327-8735. (Web) www.sfedora1.com.** Raleigh NC. Nichols, Takei, Koenig, Doohan.

17-18—**JVL Con. (608) 756-5684.** Ramada Inn, Janesville WI. W. Krimmer, S. Burgaue, L. Zocchi, M. Liebmann. Media.

23-25—**ConVersion, 203 Lynnview Rd. SE #4, Calgary AB T2C 2C6. (403) 279-4052.** Carriage House. Ben Bova, T. Huff.

23-25—**Visions, Box 904, S. Yarmouth MA 02664. (508) 896-7448.** Bayside Expo Center, Boston MA. Media SF/fantasy.

23-25—**Costume College, Box 3052, Santa Fe Springs CA 90670. ccollege99@aol.com.** Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA.

23-25—**Vulkon. (954) 434-6060. (E-mail) joemotes@aol.com.** St. Petersburg FL. Commercial Star Trek event.

24-25—**TeleFantastique, 38 Rochford Ave., Loughton IG10 2BS, UK.** Radisson Heathrow, London UK. Furlan, O'Hare.

30-Aug. 1—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. (502) 937-9245.** Executive West. E. Friesner, L. Watt-Evans.

30-Aug. 2—**MythCon, 293 Selby Ave., St. Paul MN 55102. (612) 292-8887.** Abp. Cousins Center, Milwaukee WI. Tolkien.

AUGUST 1999

26-29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. The North American SF Con (NASFiC). $125 at door.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—**AussieCon 3, Box 688, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. US$170.

AUGUST 2000

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $135.

AUGUST 2001

30-Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, 402 Huntingdon Pike. #2001, Rockledge PA 19046.** Downtown, Phila. PA. WorldCon. $135

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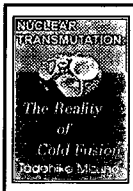

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NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER LEAD STORY

Critically acclaimed writer **Eleanor Arnason**, winner of the James Tiptree, Jr., Memorial Award, author of such novels as *Ring of Swords* and *A Woman of the Iron People*, who last appeared here in the April issue with "Stellar Harvest," returns next month with our lead story, a vivid and gorgeously colored novella called "Dapple." In this one, Arnason takes us to a distant planet inhabited by the alien hwarhath, and along with a brave and determined young girl who defies her family and sets off on a perilous adventure that takes her into uncharted territory of several sorts—into wild lawless country inhabited by bandits and remorseless killers, and, perhaps even more dangerously, into new social territory as well, as she assumes roles Forbidden To Women since time immemorial. (A woman being an actor! Shocking! Unheard of!) This one is exciting, suspenseful, and great fun as well. Don't miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Robert Reed, one of our most popular and prolific authors, returns with a subtle investigation of what one very anomalous event—the crashing of an alien spaceship—can mean to an otherwise sleepy region of the country, and to one seemingly ordinary family in particular, in the eloquent "Nodaway"; **Lois Tilton** returns with a powerful and disquieting look at "The Scientific Community," seen from the perspective of the experimental subjects rather than the scientists; hot new writer **Kage Baker** whirls us into a prosperous but regimented and rigidly stratified future society, and introduces us to a lonely little rich boy who may end up blowing it all wide open, for better or worse, in the colorful and fast-moving "Smart Alec"; acclaimed British writer **Brian Stableford** takes us to a strange high-tech future trying to recover from a worldwide ecological disaster, and shows us how there can be "Hidden Agendas" with immense consequences even among those working toward more-or-less the same goals; and hard-science writer **G. David Nordley** returns with a lighthearted look at cosmic catastrophe on a grand scale, in the sly and inventive "Mustardseed."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column scrutinizes this business of "HTTP, Etc."; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our September 1999 issue on sale on your newsstand on August 10, 1999, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe online at our *Asimov's* website **http://www.asimovs.com**), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year!

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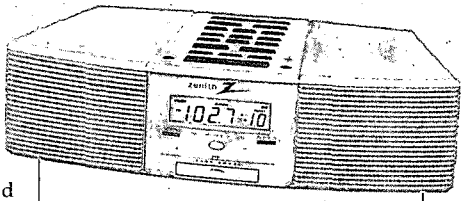

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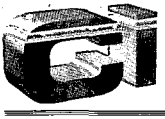

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